



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Area Planning: Department of Education;
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
Education Authority

7 July 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Mr Gerry Campbell	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mrs Lorraine Finlay	Department of Education
Mrs Janis Scallon	Department of Education
Ms Michele Corkey	Education Authority
Mr Michael McConkey	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Janis Scallon, the Department of Education's director of sustainable schools policy and planning; Michele Corkey, the Education Authority's (EA) director of education; Michael McConkey, the Education Authority's head of community planning and community and schools; and Gerry Campbell, the chief executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). I offer my sincere apologies for the changed timescales. I sincerely thank you for the time that you have given us today on the important matter of area planning. As always, 10 minutes is available to you for an opening statement, after which we will pose concise questions to you.

Mrs Janis Scallon (Department of Education): In lieu of an opening statement, I had asked whether we could give a presentation today. I felt that it was important, given that we have not been at the Committee for some time on area planning, to set the context. I will ask the Committee Clerk to share the presentation on screen, and I will try to keep to 10 minutes, although it might take 15 minutes. I will go through it as quickly as I can.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Janis.

Mrs Scallon: I cannot hear the Committee Clerk. I will let you work out how to do that, and I will go ahead with my introductions. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee today. I am joined by my colleague, Lorraine Finlay, from DE's sustainable schools policy and planning directorate; Michele Corkey, the Education Authority's director of education; and Gerry Campbell, the chief executive of CCMS. As I said, rather than making an opening statement, I thought it would be

useful to give a presentation on area planning: the underpinning policy, an overview of structures and mechanisms for area planning and some key statistics over the past number of years relating to our school system and the changes brought about by area planning. I will also present agility projects that are under way and anticipated, and I will finish with a look forward as we prepare for the next strategic area plan.

Can you see the slides? I cannot.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We have them now, Janis, thanks.

Mrs Scallon: OK, great. This is very Chris Whitty: can we move to the next slide, please?

Area planning is underpinned by 'Schools for the Future', which is often referred to as the sustainable schools policy (SSP). The key aim of area planning is to ensure that all pupils have access to a high-quality education that meets their needs in schools that are educationally and financially viable. The SSP sets out six overarching criteria that together give an overview of what sustainability means for areas and for primary and post-primary schools. Each of the six criteria, which you can see in front of you, is underpinned by multiple indicators. A myth is often perpetuated that area planning is about closing schools, but that is not the case. As you can see, the sustainable schools policy is not a financial policy but is much wider than that.

I thought that I should take some time to outline the many stakeholders involved in area planning. As you can see from the slide, it is a widely represented group of organisations, each with their respective role in area planning. The Department is responsible for setting policy, creating and publishing guidance as well as scrutiny of the area plan and its associated action plans. Just to clarify, an area plan is a multi-year plan produced by the Education Authority in conjunction with CCMS and all sectoral support bodies.

The current area plan originally covered 2017 to 2020, but it has been extended to cover the period up to and including August 2022. The area plan is on the Education Authority website and has been accompanied by a series of action plans. The latest action plan covers the period up to and including August 2022.

There are three support structures in area planning: the area planning steering group (APSG), which provides strategic direction and oversight; the area planning working group (APWG), which produces action plans and monitors operations; and the area planning local group (APLG), which produces local solutions for planning at a grassroots level. The Department chairs the area planning steering group. The Education Authority is the lead planning authority and chairs the area planning working group and the area planning local group at an operational level. CCMS has a subsidiary planning role and represents the Catholic maintained sector.

The other bodies at the bottom of the slide represent all other bodies and sectors involved in area planning. We have the Transferors' Representative Council (TRC) for Church schools representing the largest Protestant Churches; the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) for integrated schools; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) for Irish-medium schools; the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) for controlled schools; the Governing Bodies Association (GBANI) for voluntary grammar schools; and the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service for Catholic trustees. All bodies work collectively at a strategic and operational level to give effect to area planning, planning for their sectors and delivering on the aims of the sustainable schools policy.

Can we move on two slides, please? Can the Clerk hear me?

The Committee Clerk: Yes, I can hear you. The Assistant Clerk is managing the slides.

Mrs Scallon: OK. The visuals are kind of important as I am talking, otherwise I will just bore people. Will you bring up the slide on the development proposals (DPs), please?

The Committee Clerk: I think that his computer may have frozen.

Mrs Scallon: OK. I will talk on, and, hopefully, the visuals will follow.

Development proposals are the means through which the provision in an area is shaped to deliver the strategic vision outlined in the area plan. It is underpinned by a number of legislative articles. I will not

go into the detail of those, but feel free to ask. Primarily, article 14 gives cover for a development proposal to be brought forward for a grant-aided school, to establish a new school, to amend the status of an existing grant-aided school, to discontinue an existing grant-aided school or to make any other change in a school that would have a significant effect on another grant-aided school.

The Department has a duty under article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education and a duty under article 89 of the Education Order 1998 to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. The Shared Education Act 2016 also places a duty on the Department to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education.

The timeline presented in the visual that you cannot see shows the path for development proposals, so I will just talk you through those. First, it is identified that something needs to change in an area. After that, significant changes that are required are brought forward by means of a development proposal by the relevant proposer. The Education Authority will then conduct a pre-publication consultation, and then we will move to a statutory objection period. At that point, the Department becomes involved, and that statutory objection period is two months.

As regards the two-month period for the statutory objection period, you may be aware that area planning was stood down during the COVID-19 pandemic to allow my team and other officials to respond to the pandemic. When we stood area planning back up, we acknowledged the break of six months that people had while area planning was stood down, and we gave the full two months' statutory objection at the other end. We also extend statutory objection periods over the summer in the full acknowledgement that schools are off and taking a well-earned break after a long and hard academic year. In order to get the widest possible consultation, we will extend any statutory objection periods by summer, Christmas and Easter holidays, mid-term breaks and so on. It is important to point that out.

Anyone can bring forward objections, letters of support and calls for meetings to the Department. When the statutory objection period ends, the Department pulls together all the evidence that is brought in — objections or letters of support, evidence from our policy colleagues across the Department and any other evidence that comes in during the period — and brings a submission of advice to the Minister. The Minister is the ultimate decision-maker on all development proposals. Once a decision is made, it is legally binding and must be implemented. The proposers are set out in our development proposal guidance for that reason: the proposers must be able to implement the proposal if it is agreed. There is no appeal mechanism for DP decisions other than by judicial review (JR).

To give you a high-level overview, since 2017, there have been a total of 124 development proposals decisions. There were 34 in the controlled sector, 39 in the Catholic maintained sector, 31 in the integrated sector, 13 in the Irish-medium and other maintained sector and 7 from voluntary grammar schools. I am happy to take questions on that.

The next slide gives you a quick overview of our system, the schools that we have, the level of enrolments and the number of settings. I will not dwell on those.

I want to spend a bit of time on the 10-year history detailed on the next slide. I could have chosen to present many trends today, but I thought that the indicators on this slide were important as data move in herds. The best indicators when looking at area planning and the sustainability of our schools are as follows. First, the number of available places, which are often referred to as "empty desks" or "surplus places", is often focused on in the media, and, indeed, there have been recommendations in various audit reports that the Department should address the number of available places in schools. One thing to clarify, though, is that available places are not funded. Children are funded, not places. Nonetheless, the chart shows that the number of available places in our schools has reduced substantially from almost 84,500 to just over 52,500, which represents a reduction of 38% over the past 10 years. There was a reduction in primary schools of 42% and a reduction of 21% in post-primary schools. The flexibility threshold across the system should be around 10%, so there is still work to do in reducing the number of available places across our schools. I will come to that later in the presentation.

The next indicator is minimum recommended enrolments. For primary schools in urban areas, that figure is 140; for those in rural areas, it is 105. For post-primary schools, it is 500 for years 8 to 12 and 100 for sixth form. The reason that enrolment thresholds are important for sustainability is that the smaller the school, the more acute the problems can become in providing a broad and balanced curriculum. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has advised that, ideally, primary schools

should have seven classrooms, one for each year group. That equates to an optimum enrolment of 210 for single-intake schools, 420 for double-intake schools and so on. The figures on the slide are for schools that do not meet the aforementioned minimum threshold.

I mentioned that data move in herds. Whilst a stable enrolment trend is only one of six SSP criteria, it is, nonetheless, a central figure for a school's educational and financial viability. A smaller school may appear to have certain advantages in providing personal attention and a focus on individual pupils, but small schools may struggle with a range of challenges, including the demands on staff in producing a differentiated programme for classes with mixed age groups or ensuring adequate special educational needs (SEN) provision and substitute cover for teachers. There may also be a higher administrative burden on teachers, including teaching principals, leaving them less time for the preparation of lessons. Children who are taught in composite classes of three or more year groups may not have access to the full educational experience or appropriate opportunities for peer interaction. It is for those reasons that I chose to look at the number of schools that are falling under the recommended minimum enrolment thresholds.

We have seen some positive trends in the number of unsustainable primary schools over the last 10 years. There has been a reduction in unsustainable primary schools from 341 to 237. There is more work to be done in that area, however, as almost 30% of primary schools still fall under the minimum enrolment threshold. Similarly, in small post-primary schools, there are challenges to providing the broad and balanced range of subjects and specialisms needed to offer effective pathways for young people to further and higher education or to training or employment. For most primary schools and for small sixth forms of fewer than 100 pupils, the trend is more variable, but, nonetheless, there has been a reduction in the number of sixth forms that fail to meet that threshold. There is more work to be done in that area.

In recent years, there has been a downward trend in the number of post-primary schools for years 8 to 12, from a height of 104 schools falling below the sustainability threshold to 74 schools falling below the sustainability threshold. That represents a reduction of 34%. Taken together, since 2010-11, there has been a 36% reduction in post-primary schools falling below sustainability thresholds. There is work to be done — whether that is in relation to finance, professional development of staff, peer-to-peer learning and catering adequately for differentiation and learning for all children — but, bearing in mind what has gone before with enrolment being a driver of sustainability, the trends are moving in the right direction to ensure a higher quality of education for all children.

The finance chart speaks for itself. It is important to emphasise that area planning is not about achieving financial savings, nor is it a policy for the closure of schools. Evidence of the ability to work within a budget allocation is one of six criteria by which overall sustainability is assessed, and alternatives to closure are part of area planning considerations. There is a finite budget for education, and the level of unsustainability in the education system means that resources have to be distributed widely to ensure that all pupils in small schools have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. Maintaining schools that are unsustainable at an individual level impacts on all schools across the system. Across the system, however, the proportion of schools failing to meet minimum enrolment thresholds is falling, and that is to be welcomed.

Can you go to the next slide, please? I promise that I will be very quick from here on. This slide shows some of the agility projects that we have had the opportunity to work on through the Delivering Schools for the Future (DSF) transformation project. That project is about the fact that we recognise that area planning is a complex and sensitive matter and that it can take time to bring schools and communities together to make significant changes to schools and local areas. That said, through the work of the project, there was an opportunity to explore the opportunity for agility in area planning. Several key projects have come out of the DSF project. The Resetting for Area Planning process was a voluntary pilot that subsequently became a mandatory exercise in which we were able to reduce enrolments, without the need for a development proposal, in schools that had a historically high enrolment but had never filled to their places in a series of four out of five years. In short, as a result of the voluntary exercise, places were reduced by 4,000, and, as a result of the mandatory exercise, over 5,000 available places were removed from 62 primary schools that were reset through the process for primary schools. The former Minister recently decided to extend the Resetting for Area Planning process to eligible post-primary schools. That voluntary downsizing is under way.

We also had an opportunity to explore how area planning should take place for special educational needs. As a result of the work of the DSF project, we have two area planning frameworks: one for special schools and one for specialist provision in mainstream schools. Those are due with the Department imminently. The Minister will have to endorse those before we can release them. There was also a SEN pilot that looked at the need for development proposals for specialist provision in

mainstream schools and at whether that is deemed a significant enough change to warrant a development proposal. The results of that pilot report should come to the Department for endorsement by the Minister shortly. It is hoped that that will make provision for children with special educational needs much more agile and responsive to demand.

We have revised area planning guidance, and we hope to release that revised planning shortly. Other guidance in progress includes a user guide to the sustainable schools policy, bringing that up to date and making its language more current, and a circular on frameworks for developing schools that aims to support new schools over a 10-year period to ensure that the right support is put in and that they thrive and grow to become sustainable schools. The Department's development proposal guidance will also be refreshed on foot of the finalised area planning guidance.

We have also produced a sustainability baseline report that is being finalised and will need approval from the Minister before we can release it. You can read the slide for an idea of it; you do not need me to talk you through that. We are coming to the end of the current area plan in August 2022. We are in the pre-planning year for the next strategic area plan, and that is why we have developed the report. It takes existing data and trends on the quantifiable indicators of the sustainable schools policy, and we have examined a 10-year picture. You have seen some of those slides. The report does not cover all criteria in the sustainable schools policy. In taking a more outcomes-based approach, we have committed to a data-development agenda to explore data for other criteria in the policy. The report is based on analysis at the macro, Northern Ireland level, and it provides 11 additional reports, with one for each local government district. It is hoped that the evidence will be included in the wider evidence base to underpin the strategic direction of the next area plan, which is anticipated to commence in September 2022. The data in it will be refreshed with a further year of data when school census data are available.

I do not want to pre-empt what Gerry and Michele will say on the development of the next area plan. I say simply that the report has developed a long-time-series presentation of our school system that should, hopefully, highlight areas where attention needs to be focused on area planning and operational actions, in addition to giving an overview of our schools at the macro and meso levels as they meet or do not meet sustainability thresholds. It should aid the planning authorities and sectoral support bodies involved in the production of the next area plan when they engage schools and localities in looking at viable area planning solutions for their area.

The last slide is on the forward work programme. Looking ahead for area planning and bearing it in mind that the next area plan is due to commence in September 2022, we see that we are, as I have said, in the pre-planning year. A timetable for that is under way and will be published on our website shortly. It will cover all activities leading to the commencement of the next area plan. In advance of the next area plan, the Department will, in conjunction with all area planning steering group members, update the sustainability baseline report that I mentioned, produce revised area planning guidance, update guidance on producing development proposals and the development proposal process and explore the options for raising and enhancing awareness of area planning by boards of governors through a sustainability checklist that will allow all schools to be aware of the sustainable schools policy and ask them to examine themselves on the criteria used in the sustainable schools policy and to be aware of any risks of unsustainability.

We will continue to take the positives from the last year, using our newly found abilities to conduct business in a virtual world and embracing technology as an aid to effective consultation and meetings as well as digital communications in area planning. As a result of the DSF project, we are also developing the agility processes that I have mentioned. Those processes look at non-significant changes to reset or normalise a school's enrolment figure in line with established long-term trends.

Thank you for your patience. While a lot of good work has been done in a really complex and sensitive space, there is still much to be done to explore creative and innovative solutions through area planning. With collaborative and collective solutions from all those involved — as I outlined with the slide, many organisations are involved in area planning at all levels — we will continue to work to achieve the aim of the sustainable schools policy that all children have access to a high-quality education in a school that is educationally and financially viable. We will continue to work collectively to have the right number of schools of the right type and size in the right locations at the right time and with a focus on raising standards.

Thank you again for your patience. I will pass to Michele and Gerry for anything that they wish to add to my statement.

Ms Michele Corkey (Education Authority): Thank you, Janis. Chair, with your permission, I will make a brief statement.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Thanks, Michele. I will have to keep our questions extremely concise, but we appreciate the information that you bring to us.

Ms Corkey: Thank you. Good morning, Chair and members.

The Education Authority, as you know, has overall operational responsibility for planning of provision within the area planning policy and strategic framework set by the Department of Education. The Education Authority is also the managing authority for all controlled schools. The key aspect of the Education Authority's overall role since its inception has been to bring together and work in partnership with all other educational partners: the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Controlled Schools' Support Council, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Governing Bodies Association, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service, the Transferor Representatives' Council and the Department for the Economy, representing the further education (FE) sector. A key outcome of that has been the harmonisation of area planning practices and improved cooperation and collaboration.

During the lifetime of the first strategic area plan, under the leadership of the Education Authority, 32 unsustainable schools have been discontinued, 81 more schools are above the minimum SSP enrolment threshold, there are 25 fewer small primary schools with composite classes of more than two year groups, and over 8,000 pupils are now in more educationally viable schools. As the managing authority for controlled schools and through partnership working with our colleagues in the Controlled Schools' Support Council, from April 2017, 12 unsustainable controlled schools have been discontinued, and 14 have increased their admission and enrolment numbers to meet demand. Those outcomes demonstrate clearly that the Education Authority has been and will continue to be focused on meeting the needs of children and young people to improve educational outcomes, to make that happen in the most efficient and effective way possible and to ensure that all pupils are educated in educationally viable schools.

Despite the positive outcomes from the first strategic area plan, there is more to be done, as Janis outlined. In some areas, there are too many schools for the size of the population, while, in other areas, there are not enough places. It may also be the case that there are not even enough school places of the right type. In some areas, there may be a demand for controlled, maintained, integrated or Irish-medium education that is not being met. Therefore, as we move into the second strategic area plan, the Education Authority affirms its position that the purpose of area planning is to contribute to school improvement. At every stage, the focus of decisions locally will continue to be related to the needs of children and young people.

One of the key challenges for all of us is that area planning is not about retaining schools or institutions from a particular sector or tradition but about providing every child and young person with a range of educational experiences that will prepare them fully to contribute to the prosperity of the community in which they live and work. That can be achieved only through a network of viable and sustainable schools that are of the right type and size, are in the right place and have a focus on raising standards. That will continue to be most challenging in rural communities, which are often served by two small primary schools, one under the management of the Education Authority and the other managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. Both organisations recognise that the closure of such schools can be extremely difficult for the community. Therefore, the next strategic area plan will have a clear focus on engaging communities in a shared exploration of the way forward to work towards a realistic, sustainable solution by providing further guidance and support to governors and local community leaders to ensure ongoing school provision in those areas where possible.

Thank you, Chair. I hand over to Gerry.

Mr Gerry Campbell (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools): Thank you, Chair. I will be brief. Good morning to you and the Committee.

Janis and Michele have outlined the key strategic aims and objectives of area planning and its outcomes, challenges and future direction. I want to talk a wee bit about the role that CCMS plays. CCMS is a key partner, along with the Department and the Education Authority and our other sectoral colleagues, in progressing area planning. The council supports the view that our education system should provide high-quality education for all young people and that there must be equity of access and

opportunity to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets pupil needs in sustainable schools within a diverse system of education.

CCMS also believes that the Catholic and faith-based ethos of our schools in the maintained sector enables a particular focus on the wider holistic development of all of our young people to achieve their full potential and a close link with their wider community and on informing educational opportunities beyond the school setting. We have a distinct role in CCMS as a planning authority for 450 maintained nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools. CCMS works closely with the trustees of Catholic grammar schools to enact and progress the recommendations of their 2012 post-primary schools area plan.

As Michele and Janis have indicated, since its inception, CCMS has brought forward a significant number of often very challenging proposals to support the development of a network of sustainable schools providing that high-quality education in line with our stated aim of raising educational standards for all. Since 2013, CCMS has implemented 13 amalgamations, bringing forward 13 new schools as a result of 31 schools discontinuing. In that time, CCMS has also brought forward the discontinuance of 16 primary schools and seven post-primary schools. In total, that has removed almost 10,000 spare places in the system. Alongside that, CCMS has worked in close collaboration with the trustees of seven Catholic voluntary grammar schools to remove or reduce the use of academic selection.

CCMS recognises that changes to the nature of a school or the provision in a particular area or locality is often difficult for any community, and we appreciate the challenges that that brings. However, our focus must always be on access to educational choices for the pupils that best meet their individual needs, talents and abilities and maximise their opportunities and chances to reach their full potential. We will continue to work with our trustees and our other colleagues across the educational sector to improve outcomes for all; to sustain strong, successful and viable schools that are well led by their governors, principals and staff; and, ultimately, to uphold an education system that plays a powerful and positive role in the normalising of our society and helps to make it sustainable and vibrant.

Finally, we recognise the significant and challenging issues that principals, governors and our schools have faced over the past year in the COVID-19 pandemic. We commend our school leaders and the wider school communities for their remarkable efforts to continue to support our pupils and ensure continuity of learning throughout that period.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed for your presentations. We have about 30 minutes at the absolute maximum for, I think, seven members' questions. Members, that is less than four minutes each. You normally have about seven or eight minutes, so calculate half of what you normally say and go from that point. This could have been helped by people speaking to me in advance of today to ensure that our Committee business was better handled. It was not, and we move on. I apologise for the short nature of the questions. Witnesses, we are extremely grateful for your time today.

I will start. A study of pairs of schools found that, in 2017-18, 274 of 817 primary schools, approximately 34%, were below sustainability thresholds; 32 pairs of primary schools were less than one mile apart, providing education on a separated basis; 10 schools had fewer than 50 pupils; and some schools had a ratio of one teacher for eight pupils when the NI average was one teacher for 22. Have we made adequate progress on those figures?

Mrs Scallon: Chair, I am happy to take that one. In the presentation, I outlined the movement that there has been in areas. As Michele, Gerry and I have all said, area planning is extremely complex and sensitive. From a strategic point of view, you could look at numbers and go into an area and simply close all small schools. However, when you go into a rural community to tell that to people who are very attached to their school and where the school has a long history in that community and really is the centre of that community, as is often the case, that is a really sensitive and emotional discussion to have to have. Area-based solutions for small areas, large urban areas and areas in which there might be two very small primary schools, as Michele alluded to, might be that they share or collaborate, or there may be an innovative solution. It takes time to bring communities and stakeholders into the mix to have the discussions and the important early-stage consultation before options are put on the table and anything comes into the action plan stage of the area-planning cycle.

I appreciate that the drop may look quite small, but, over the past 10 years, there has been substantial change in terms of the reduction of unsustainable schools. We have more work to do in that area, but that has to be done in the knowledge that it is a complex area. Going into communities to talk about

removing something or potentially removing something that they have been so attached to for so long — for generations — is difficult. We have to acknowledge that. That is why the area-planning process can be slow-moving, but it is definitely moving in the right direction.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am not wedded to or suggesting blanket school closure to respond to those figures. Janis, you alluded to innovative area-based solutions, which is the way forward. I would love to have more time to ask you for examples of such innovative area-based solutions, but I am pushed for time. Do you have any concise examples of where that is taking place?

Mrs Scallon: I will go to another area of my work: the progress of the shared education campuses programme. We have four shared education campuses that bring together already sustainable schools to share. The first of those projects under my remit is in Limavady, where the two schools — St Mary's and Limavady High School — are, conveniently, next door to each other. They already have a long history of sharing. If you go to St Mary's and decide to do drama, for example, you will automatically go into Limavady High School to do that subject. They are building a STEM centre. It is really positive to see. They have broken ground, and we anticipate that the building will be up sooner than expected. There are opportunities for innovative and creative solutions for schools to come together.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The independent review of integrated education recommended:

"That a stakeholder engagement strategy for Area Planning is developed with a specific focus on how planning authorities engage with local communities around innovative integrated, jointly managed and shared options."

Is that being implemented?

Mrs Scallon: I will go first, and then I will pass to Michele and Gerry as the statutory planning authorities. Part and parcel of area planning and development proposal guidance and what I am aware of through the area planning steering group in which all of our stakeholders are involved is heavy consultation with communities. Sometimes, that can take years in communities, as I alluded to in an earlier answer. There is wide consultation. There is a mechanism for that consultation, and then there are the statutory elements of the consultation, which are the affected school consultation by the EA and the statutory objection period by the Department. At all levels, from grassroots to strategic level, consultation is wide. Options for area solutions are explored at all of those levels. I will pass to Michele and Gerry to talk about it from an operational perspective.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I apologise: I am pretty much out of time for my questions, so I would appreciate it if you could be as concise as possible.

Ms Corkey: Certainly, Chair. Yes, our stakeholder engagement is extensive and continues to grow. Throughout the first strategic area plan, consultation processes were completed. As we move into the second strategic area plan, that stakeholder engagement has been enhanced. That is a benefit of COVID. We now have different processes of consultation, and those processes will be enhanced. As we move forward, it will become more extensive.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will close with special school area planning. In 2012, an entire new, additional special school was recommended for Belfast. The last area plan proposed the extension of at least one school, Cedar Lodge, to provide for ages three to 19. It remains at 16, with difficulties experienced this year as a result. Will you provide a concise response on whether we are any closer to delivering a new special school for Belfast and extending provision in schools such as Cedar Lodge from age three to 19?

Ms Corkey: With Janis's permission, I will respond to that. We have had the consultation on the special school framework. That has given us a basis for developing a five-year strategic plan specifically for special educational needs and a basis on which to move forward. The short answer, Chris, is yes. The responses are now complete, and the consultations have gone to the DE. The framework for special schools and specialist provision in mainstream schools will be with the Department no later than 9 July and will go through the Education Authority's board on 5 August. Obviously, we are developing that framework in close consultation with special school leaders.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Michele. It would be great to get timescales on that as well.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks to all of you this morning. This year, again, some students still have not got a place, yet we are told that there are thousands of available places in the system. Area planning was supposed to deal with that, yet we see it year after year. I presume that you will say that places are not available in the right locations or in the right sectors, but area planning was supposed to deal with those issues. Will you comment on that?

My second question deals with Irish-medium education. The proposed changes to the minimum threshold in the sustainable schools policy would probably disproportionately impact on the Irish-medium sector. The proposed 10-year period for a school to demonstrate sustainability would also have an impact. Historically, only 29% of Irish-medium schools would have met that threshold. Again, Irish-medium education is likely to be disproportionately affected. Will you comment on both of those questions?

Mrs Scallon: I am happy to take that question, Pat. You have ventured into post-primary transfer, but you have correctly linked it to area planning. At the end of this year, almost 99% of children in the P7 cohort were placed, and almost 85% of children were placed in their school of first preference. We had 280 children who were unplaced at the end of the process and were still to receive a place. As of yesterday, that figure was down to 84. We are working closely with colleagues in the Education Authority to ensure that those children are placed as quickly as possible.

You are right: at the end of the process, there were around 2,700 places available in our schools across the North. As I said, the aim of area planning is to have the right number, type and size of schools in the right location at the right time. I preface that by saying again that area planning is complex and it is almost impossible to make those decisions quickly or overnight. You have to be able to consult at an early stage. There are statutory processes that have to be followed, and the development proposal process can take a while. It is that early stage of getting communities engaged and signed up to the significant changes that potentially need to take place in their areas to give effect to having the right schools of the right size and type at the right time in the right location.

We have a temporary variation policy that allows us, through different legislation, to temporarily vary a school's admission or enrolment number for one year. Up until yesterday — it may have changed again this morning — we had put 941 additional places into schools so far this year. We will do that. We have always used the temporary variation policy where we see demographic pressure in certain sectors. At local community level, the population varies quite a bit year-on-year. We need a solution that enables temporary variation to school enrolment in order to meet the demographic pressure in an area. Area planning is strategic planning in the long term. We have seen, as I showed, that the direction of travel is right. I am confident that it will continue to be right with the next area plan, and, hopefully, it will also be much quicker.

There is no plan to change any sustainability thresholds, certainly at the minute. You might be referring to the definitions of "urban" and "rural" that we use in the sustainable schools policy. We have updated the definitions in line with those used by the rest of the government, statutory and voluntary organisations. In the sustainable schools policy, Belfast and Derry local government districts, as they were before local government reform, were deemed to be urban, and the rest of the 24 local government districts, as they were, were deemed to be rural. Our population has grown — it grows by around 100,000 every 10 years — so we have to recognise that some areas that were previously deemed in the policy to be rural areas might have become much more urbanised. We have changed the definitions. That has been approved and will take effect in the next area plan.

You referred to Irish-medium schools perhaps being disproportionately affected. I will say a couple of things on that and then pass to Lorraine to talk about the developing schools work. Very few schools are affected — we are into single figures — and there will be a transition period for that change to take effect.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Janis, I am sorry but that is almost six minutes. I am working to a timescale today; apologies. Pat, do you have an urgent final question to ask? I will be cutting people off left, right and centre. All I can do is apologise. Sorry, folks.

Mr Sheehan: I understand the time constraints. Thank you for that, Janis.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I can only apologise.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you to all for the presentation. It is absolutely fascinating for someone who is new to the Committee.

What role does the issue of children travelling to suitable places in post-primary schools have in area planning? I think of Craigavon Senior High School in particular, where, if the development proposal is followed through, children will have to travel to its Lurgan site. Should we not have looked for a single site in the wider Craigavon area for the whole of that school? How do travel and the issue of taking children out of their distinct communities impact on that proposal?

We have a lot of work to do on how we help children make choices at the age of 14. You gave a good example from Limavady of how schools cooperate and how you can produce something special and unique. There is an opportunity to do that more expansively with the further education sector. What is your view on that? Is that figured into the area planning in any way?

Mrs Scallon: Diane, I will come in first quickly and then pass to colleagues in the Education Authority.

The development proposal for Craigavon Senior High School is still under consideration in the Department. You will appreciate that I cannot get drawn into what any decision might be. We need to use all the evidence that we have and that has been put in during the statutory objection period in order to advise the Minister, so I cannot be drawn on that question right now.

On the wider issue of travel, the sustainable schools policy, which is on the website, has criteria that reference "reasonable" travelling times to schools and things like that. That is all that I can say on that, and I will pass to the EA in a second.

In terms of the Department for the Economy and further and higher education, I have to apologise because I did not mention them when I went through that overview slide. The Department for the Economy is represented at area planning steering groups, so we work closely with it. I agree that there is a lot of opportunity for creative and innovative solutions, particularly for post-16. Obviously, the Department will work closely with DFE on the 14-19 strategy.

In the interests of time, I pass over to Michele in case she has anything to add.

Ms Corkey: Thank you, Janis. Michael would like to respond.

Mr Michael McConkey (Education Authority): In reference to the question about Craigavon Senior High School, the Education Authority's proposal and the development proposal reference the need to move to one site, but, because of the protocols, we cannot access that capital funding until the development proposal decision is made. It was clearly stated by our EA board members that it is their desire to have Craigavon Senior High School on one site in new accommodation.

To follow up on Janis's point about further education, it is inextricably linked with post-primary schools. For example, a recent development proposal for the sixth form at Ballymoney High School was linked with the work in the area learning community, with other schools in the area and with FE. Similarly, work that we are taking forward in Coleraine is inextricably linked with the other schools in the area through the area learning community but, in particular, the university and FE college. We totally agree with the member's comment on the role of FE in area planning.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sorry, but that is time up. Would you would like to ask a concise final question or make a final comment?

Mrs Dodds: No, I am good. It is a subject that I will return to, because it is really important.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I agree, Diane. Thank you for raising those questions.

Can I bring Daniel McCrossan MLA in for four minutes, please? Daniel is not there.

Robbie Butler MLA, please.

Mr Butler: I have two questions, so I will be brief. The first one is in regard to area planning and the work that is done with local planning. For example, a large development in Lisburn of 600 houses could, in future development plans, be somewhere in the region of 1,500 to 2,000 homes. What does

the statutory consultation look like for future-proofing the provision of school places when large new builds happen?

Mrs Scallon: I am happy to start the response on that one, Robbie. It is a question for the Department for Infrastructure, which looks after planning. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: Ah, come on. You guys build the schools.

Mrs Scallon: From an education perspective, we in DE, along with the Education Authority and CCMS, are statutory planning partners for community planning. We are there in every local government district, and a DE director is assigned to each local government district for community planning, so conversations take place. From an area planning perspective, we do not operate on the basis of "Build it and they will come". We cannot plan for what is not there. If there are x number of houses, it does not necessarily mean that we will need a school of a certain type and size in that location. We may already have enough places in the area to service the development, but, until people move in, we do not know who will live there. We do not know whether it will be young families, older people or a mix or whether we will have primary-school children, preschool children or post-primary children living there. It is difficult to plan in that way. When you plan for houses, you are building houses of a certain type to accommodate whoever wants to move into them. When you plan for education, you need the children to be there to see what type of education is needed. Michele or Gerry, do you want to come in on the back of that?

Mr Campbell: I will come in on Robbie's question. It is important to have continual engagement and communication between the education organisations and the community planning teams in the councils. We also look at the potential impacts on existing provision. In managing, we talk about area planning and the sustainability levels in primary and post-primary schools. We ensure that there is continued engagement with the relevant players on the ground, even through local groups and feeding up to the area planning strategic group.

As Janis explained, it is not as simple as putting in a school and then hoping that the children will come; we have to have those conversations and see where the trends and changes are happening and try to be ahead of the curve. It is not an exact science. It can be challenging, and we appreciate that. Maximising that engagement with the relevant statutory partners and even looking outside education is important as part of the continuing process.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that. My question might seem unfairly pitched at you. It is not a criticism, by the way, of how you go about it. There is something wrong with area planning in councils when planning permission is granted for large-scale development. Often, the developer will stick a school in when there has been no discussion with the Department or the Education Authority of whether the school is viable, appropriate or whether the money exists. It is a sop at times — a false promise. It needs to change, guys. I am just being upfront. It is probably driven by Infrastructure, if we are being honest. We can do better with projections, because we know that, when we build a certain type of house, a certain type of person will live in it. We can do that multiplication.

I have a question for you, Michele, on special educational needs. Can you give us any figures with regard to unplaced children for September at this point? Hopefully, there are not many. There were a few last year, and I hope that we will not revisit that.

Ms Corkey: Thanks for that, Robbie. *[Laughter.]* You know that we have been open and transparent about our process this year. It has been a mammoth task to get all the children placed, and I am happy to report that, on 5 July — this week — 98.7% of our children placed at stage 5 of the code of practice. The final 0.12% or 0.13% are being addressed as we speak. We find ourselves in a good place and are confident that September will look very different this year.

Mr Butler: I hope so. Thanks, Michele. Thanks for making the figure available. I hope that everybody gets a place.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Michele, how many pupils are unplaced in special schools at this stage for next year?

Ms Corkey: None.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): None?

Ms Corkey: Sorry, I beg your pardon: there are four. It is not that they have not been placed, but the places have to be confirmed. At this moment, Chris, every child has been placed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I bring in Nicola Brogan MLA for four minutes.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, everyone, for your presentations this morning. I joined the meeting a bit late. I missed most of it, so I apologise if I make you repeat yourselves. I represent West Tyrone, which is a largely rural constituency. Can you tell me how you meet the objectives of the sustainable schools policy and meet rural needs?

Mrs Scallon: I will start, Nicola, and then pass to the planning authorities. Michele has already said that area planning takes account of the communities in which it is situated at that time. It is a grassroots project as well. We have strategic area planning, where the chief executives of all the organisations look at the area plan. However, ultimately, area planning comes from the bottom up. It is designed locally by local representation of all the organisations that I outlined in my presentation, who know their areas best. Conversations taking place in planning for rural areas can be slightly different from those for urban areas, where you tend to see less unsustainability. However, it takes account of rural needs under the Rural Needs Act 2016. Once those local conversations take place in order to come up with area solutions, they come up through the area planning working group, the steering group, and, ultimately, if the result is that a development proposal is brought for a change to a school, we take account of the Rural Needs Act. The planner —the proposer— will take account of the Rural Needs Act and the needs of rural children. The Department will also take account of the Act, as we are obliged to under the statutory process.

I will pass to Michele or Gerry, if they have anything that they want to say.

Ms Corkey: Thanks, Janis. The strategic area plan in 2015 was a mechanism for organisations to work together for the first time on a regional basis. That is where your question, Nicola, sits: how do you marry the regional requirements with rural proofing? As Janis said, in all of the work that we do, there is a rural needs screening for every proposal. We definitely do not engage in a process of slash and burn; it is strategic in its intent. As we move into the second strategic area plan, we will work with local communities to find, as Janis said, innovative solutions to make sure that the right school is in the right place at the right time for the children who need it.

Mr Campbell: A lot of it goes back to the early engagement that takes place with local communities. We cannot overemphasise that. Sometimes, change can happen over a long time, but, when maintaining that engagement and having conversations that are sometimes difficult, the pupil has to be at the centre. The six criteria in the sustainable schools policy are ultimately about providing a broad and balanced curriculum offer for pupils and ensuring that they get the best possible educational experience to set them up for later in life. Sometimes, that means having difficult and challenging conversations; that will continue. We welcome the cooperation of local stakeholders on the ground, whether they be parents, folks from the councils, the schools or other interested parties.

Ms Brogan: Absolutely, Gerry. That is key.

Janis, you talked about engaging with locals and it being a grassroots issue and starting from there. Engagement with people on the ground is key. It is always so important to remember to reflect rural needs. They can easily be forgotten, so I will continue to raise the issue. Thanks so much for all that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I bring in Justin McNulty MLA, please, for four minutes?

Mr McNulty: Thanks, folks, for your evidence. I will get right to it. Area planning for special schools seems to be particularly problematic. It appears that many have been failing miserably for years in terms of their intake. The area planning process has been discussed at length. How does that tally with the fact that so many special schools cannot accommodate the numbers who seek access to them and have to move to other schools via temporary arrangements, such as modular classrooms? How does that tally with good area planning?

Ms Corkey: The work that we have done in the consultations for the frameworks — the consultation has just closed — gives us a framework to work against so that we are much more strategic in the way

in which we address those issues. We have worked closely with our special school principals in that space. The consultation was extended twice to make sure that everybody's voice was heard and that we are all involved in the strategic direction. The frameworks that we have for special schools and for specialist provision in mainstream schools gives us a mechanism in which to work so that we can make sure that children are placed in the appropriate places in schools that are fit to meet the growing complex needs of our children at the moment.

Mr McNulty: I know of issues locally where parents know that their child should be in a special school, but, because the special school does not have the capacity, they have to go to a different school via a temporary arrangement or agreement. That is not ideal. How does that sit with the area planning framework?

Ms Corkey: The specialist provision framework will move forward at the same time as the strategic area plan for mainstream schools, so there will not be any delay. All of that work will work in tandem so that we can address those issues in a much more strategic way.

Mr McNulty: Janis, you said that data moves in herds. What does that mean?

Mrs Scallon: I will give a different example to take it out of the education arena. When one piece of data moves, others tend to follow. That is what I mean when I say that data moves in herds. If we look at worldwide poverty statistics, we see that, in short, reducing infant mortality reduces poverty, so, when we look at things like low birthweight, if we focus on that indicator and make that better, other data will follow and long-term outcomes, long-term health, disability rates and things like that will get better. In area planning, failing to meet that enrolment threshold brings with it a raft of other indicators that will follow a trajectory. If we cannot get to an enrolment threshold, it will have an impact on teacher professional learning, the quality of education, the ability to cater ably and adequately for children with special educational needs and peer-to-peer interaction and the learning and cognitive development of children. That is crucial information for us in area planning. It is central that other data moves along behind that indicator. That is what I meant by "Data moving in herds".

Mr McNulty: OK. That was well explained.

I want to ask about the development proposal process. I have had a good experience of the proposal for St John the Baptist's College in Portadown, which will impact [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] The community and the school are thrilled with how that moved forward positively for them.

I also want to ask about the 82 children, I believe, who are still unplaced in secondary schools. How soon will that be resolved for those children and their parents? How many children and families are really not pleased with the outcome of the transfer and admissions process?

Mrs Scallon: As I said, almost 99% of children were placed, and 85% of children were placed in their first preference. We absolutely recognise that not all families receive the news that they had perhaps anticipated or hoped for. The Department cannot guarantee any child a place in any school. Under legislation, we allow for parents to state their preferences. To increase the chances of placing a child, a parent needs to put multiple preferences on their form. Those must be realistic preferences, where the parents have looked at the admissions criteria for the schools and ensured that their children can meet those criteria.

It is a complex process. Looking ahead to next year, I know that communications could be more detailed and user-friendly for parents in order to ensure that they understand the concept of their child's transition to post-primary, the importance of detailing more than one preference, of reading the admissions criteria and picking the right school on the basis of realistic indicators for their child. Parents need to put down a range of preferences, not all of which are necessarily grammar schools, as we say in our guidance. We produce a lot of guidance in that area.

I believe that the number of children who are still unplaced is 84, unless you are aware of two who have been placed today, Justin.

Mr McNulty: [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mrs Scallon: I do not have that information to hand but, yesterday, it was 84. I can categorically state that my team and the Education Authority's school admissions team are working night and day to

ensure that those 84 children are placed. We have not stopped. We are working weekends and late nights, myself included, to ensure that those children get a place. We are on that full-time but —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, that is six minutes. Do you want to make a concise closing comment?

Mr McNulty: I wish you the best of luck with your work. That issue is causing real concern for children and their families, and it will be important to resolve it promptly.

Mr Harvey: Thank you all very much. I think that you said that preschools were down by 16. Is that a result of falling preschool pupil numbers, or is it part of a broader trend of difficulty in the sector?

Mrs Scallon: I am sorry, Harry; can you repeat the question for me? I did not mention preschools in my opening statement.

Mr Harvey: OK. I thought that I had read somewhere that preschools were down by 16. Are they not?

Mrs Lorraine Finlay (Department of Education): It will be on the chart.

Mrs Scallon: I need to have a look at the figures that are there.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is on a slide: "School enrolments in Northern Ireland: 2020/21 Key statistics". There are statistics for funded preschool settings.

Mrs Scallon: OK, I have it. Sorry. That slide gives an overview of our school estate and the number of different types of facilities. Area planning and the sustainable schools policy cover only primary and post-primary schools, hence my confusion. Yes, preschool provision did go down; it flexes. You will be aware that we have statutory and voluntary provision at preschool. That flexes every year in line with the demographics. The population of three-year-olds who are of compulsory preschool age goes up and down every year in local areas, so we need to be able to flex the provision in order to provide for them. There is a preschool place for every parent who wants one for their child.

Mr Harvey: That is great.

How many schools are at risk of closure?

Mrs Scallon: I do not think that I can give a figure for those at risk of closure. Area planning, as I said, looks far more at solutions. It should be about working with schools that are at risk of being unsustainable. There are a lot of factors to take into account, and the answer to an unsustainable school is not necessarily closure.

Mr Harvey: OK. Is there a policy on how long a school remains under threat before a decision is taken? Is there a time frame for that?

Mrs Scallon: We do not have a policy on a time frame.

Mr Harvey: That is fine. Thank you very much.

Mr Campbell: Harry, I will come in there. It is important that governors, the principal and others in a school are aware and cognisant of where there may be challenges. It is important to have early conversations and engagement, rather than burying their heads in the sand and thinking that things will go away or get better. It is good to have the conversations, be aware of the challenges and see whether there are creative and innovative ways that can address those challenges. Early engagement and ownership of the challenges at a local school level are important as part of the overall process.

Mr Harvey: That is 100%, Gerry. Thank you very much for that. Thank you all.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can we bring in Daniel McCrossan MLA for no more than four minutes, please?

Mr McCrossan: I want to continue with the theme of special schools and meeting the area planning needs of our vulnerable children. Does the area planning process take into account the need for specialist teachers to be available in sufficient numbers to populate classrooms? Given that we all want the best for our children, workforce planning must play some part in the special school scenario. Do the witnesses agree with that? Further to that, do EA and DE have any plans to ask the ETI to evaluate the effectiveness of the emergency provision that the EA is putting in place to accommodate hundreds of SEN children this year?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Michele, do you want to come in on that?

Ms Corkey: Thank you, Chris. I can certainly start. To answer your last question first, Daniel, yes, ETI will undertake a review of the specialist provision that has been established. That will be done in conjunction with us. We absolutely need to look at that. That is in train, and we are working to move it forward quickly. Workforce planning absolutely has to be a factor. We are heartened by the recruitment that has taken place for our special schools in the last few months and by the availability of specialist provision: teachers who are specially trained. It is, obviously, an area that we need to work on. We need to work closely with our universities in that space. Yes, it will have to be factored in as part of the process.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Thank you. May I ask another brief question, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: Considering the importance of area planning, has there been consultation with key stakeholders, including the schools, in recent times about their opinion of the effectiveness and relevance of area planning in their area? Further to that, have you done the same for other stakeholders, such as parents and pupils?

Mrs Scallon: Daniel, is that in relation to area planning for special schools or generic mainstream area planning?

Mr McCrossan: It is generic.

Mrs Scallon: OK. I am happy to take that. As for consultation, the strategic area plan sets out at a strategic level what will happen over the next five years. That is accompanied by a series of action plans that set out what will happen at an operational level. The EA consults on the strategic area plan. Michele, I am sure, will come in on that in a minute. Each solution for an area is heavily consulted on. The statutory objection period is when anyone can put forward their thoughts and feelings on any proposal for any school in any area. There is a lot of consultation. Michele, do you want to talk about the next strategic area plan and consultation?

Ms Corkey: Chris had already asked for the time frame for the consultation. We are at the stage of moving to the consultation on the next strategic area plan. The consultation starts with the sustainability baseline report and then moves to workshops. We work very closely with the Department. We then consult all our key stakeholders. This is a bit like the conversation earlier on: when we engage with the stakeholder discussion is really important. We want optimum value and participation. In the early autumn of this year, we will move to the non-school and school stakeholder engagement. To ensure that schools can engage with us appropriately, the consultation processes on the strategic area plan will move into November and January. It is a key part of the process moving forward.

Mr McCrossan: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks. Members, all the questions have been asked.

Folks, thank you very much for your engagement today. I am sorry that our time was so short. Obviously, we would like to return to this issue in due course. Thank you for all the work that you do on all the matters that we have raised.