

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 17 Aibreán 2018

Tuesday, 17 April 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Thomas Byrne,	Paul Gavan.
Kathleen Funchion,	
Tony McLoughlin,	
Jan O'Sullivan.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Seán Crowe, Martin Heydon and John Lahart and Senator Grace O'Sullivan.

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 4.08 p.m.

Schools Building Programme Delays: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode because, as we know, they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for Debates Office staff to report proceedings. They also adversely affect television coverage and web streaming.

We have reached No. 5 on our agenda, which is our engagement with stakeholders on the topic of the lapse in time between the announcement of the construction of new schools and eventual completion dates. The committee has decided to divide the meeting into two different sessions. We will now start the first session, the purpose of which is to have an engagement with a number of school principals on the topic to which I refer. On behalf of the committee, I welcome our three guests. We have before us Ms Muireann Carr, deputy principal of Ballinteer Educate Together national school. I wish to point out that Deputy Catherine Martin, who had nominated the school, unfortunately has a family bereavement, but Senator Grace O'Sullivan is here in her stead. We also have Mr. Brian Bergin, principal of St. Paul's secondary school, Monasterevin, County Kildare, which is the school I nominated. Our third guest is Mr. Liam Burke, principal of Whitecross national school, Julianstown, County Meath, which Deputy Thomas Byrne nominated. The format is that I will invite the witnesses to make brief opening statements of approximately three minutes' duration and these will be followed by engagement with members of the committee. I thank the witnesses for their written submissions.

Before we begin, I wish to draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by me, as Chairman, to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I also advise the witnesses that the opening statements they have made available to the committee will be published on our website after this meeting. I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I now call on Ms Carr to make her opening statement on behalf of Ballinteer Educate Together national school.

Ms Muireann Carr: I thank the committee for the invitation to appear. My name is Muireann Carr and I am the deputy principal of Ballinteer Educate Together national school in Dublin 14. I am making a statement and in attendance on behalf of Marie Gordon, who unfortunately cannot be here today.

Our school opened in 2012 with one junior infant class. Now, in 2018, we have 11 classes, 275 pupils and a waiting list of more than 250 for our 60 places next year. We will grow to a minimum of 335 pupils and a staff of at least 25 next year and we are currently located in

the second of our temporary buildings. For the first five years, we occupied a section of St. Tiernan's community school in Balally, Dublin 16. The latter is a secondary school adjacent to our permanent location. The classrooms and prefabs there were half the size of a primary classroom; one class in particular was in a converted locker room a quarter the size of a primary classroom. Four learning support teachers worked with children with special educational needs in the lobby, divided by bookcases and notice boards. The principal's office was constructed by our caretaker out of recycled plasterboard in a corner of the lobby. We had no sports hall, so PE and sports were dependent entirely on the weather. Most parents bought or rented houses and apartments in the area to be near a permanent location and now must travel much further to our current location.

Five years later, in August 2017, we were instructed by the Department to move everything to Notre Dame in Churchtown, Dublin 14. This is a distance of approximately 3 km but traffic means the journey can take half an hour or more. Many families, despite loving the school, have been compelled to move on to other schools. This has had a knock-on effect on numbers in the school and the staffing schedule. The bus transport section of the Department of Education and Skills will not provide transport for our displaced families even though we meet the required distances. Approximately ten to 15 families have had to pay for a private bus at a cost of €60 per child per month. Many parents had to spend last summer searching for after-school facilities in the new area and organise extra childcare. The impact of the delays in securing our permanent building include: the difficult educational environment for pupils, especially those with special educational needs; challenging work conditions for staff and the principal; the deflection of a principal's role from that of teaching and learning; a demoralising lack of communication and evidence of progress; extra financial costs for families; parents' feeling that their right to a school of their choosing is not being facilitated; logistical challenges; health and safety issues; the erosion of confidence in the Department; difficulty in embedding the school in the community due to moving and the lack of a definite long-term plan; the challenges for the board of management in dealing with a lack of communication and organising constant change, refurbishment and logistics; and the cost to the school of a second temporary refurbishment - for example, IT costs. The board consequently needs to manage finances with great skill in order to deal with the extra costs associated with making the temporary accommodation fit for purpose.

From our school's perspective, the cause of the delays in constructing a school building appear to be: a lack of forward planning, which allowed a suitable building owned by the Department of Education and Skills to become landlocked over the course of 30 years; perhaps a lack of analysis of demographics and the consequent future need for a school in our area; and an apparent lack of joined-up planning involving one person or one section of the Department focusing on the project from the sanctioning of the school all the way to the completion of the construction.

I thank the committee and I will be happy to answer any questions.

Chairman: I thank Ms Carr. We now move to Mr. Brian Bergin, principal of St. Paul's in Monasterevin.

Mr. Brian Bergin: I thank the esteemed members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for the invitation to come before them to make this opening statement. My name is Brian Bergin. I have been a teacher in St. Paul's secondary school since 2003. I was appointed acting deputy principal in 2006 and principal in 2010. I have been very fortunate in my position in that I have enjoyed the unwavering support of wonderful students, staff, community, board and

parents, for which I am most grateful.

In 2005, 13 years ago, our school was named on a public private partnership, PPP, bundle of schools. In February 2018, the Department informed us that we were profiled for construction to commence in the third quarter of 2019. This would finally see the school completed in March 2021. However, how can we reasonably expect this latest completion date to materialise after the events of the past 13 years, a period filled with excitement, expectation, hope, frustration and, latterly, anger and despair? So many of the delays regarding our project have related to the identification and acquisition of a suitable site and the provision of services thereto.

I have a number of questions I would like addressed. What role did the Department play in the selection of the site? Did it carry out a feasibility study into the provision of services to the preferred site? Why do unresolved legal issues remain in respect of the procurement of the preferred site? Why did the size of the preferred site decrease by almost 50% from the original site identified despite the school being built for more students? The Department is the client in this project, and we are very appreciative of that. I understand that different sections of the building unit are responsible for different aspects of the each project. Again, however, I have a few questions about this. Who in the Department takes lead responsibility in such a project? Who is responsible for ensuring timelines are met and co-ordinated between the various sections of the Department, with the design team, the local authority, the statutory bodies and, most importantly, the school? Is there a more time-efficient and financially accountable way of making developmental decisions at critical stages with critical stakeholders? As the financing of the project comes from central government, through taxpayers' contributions, why does it appear to be a game of which government agency will pay at each juncture?

Throughout this journey, I have worked with wonderful professionals who have done sterling work to progress the project to this point. Having submitted the stage 2B report last week, we are now at a point at which the Department can expedite our project. They can do this by ensuring they give it the utmost attention, the benefit of their expertise, and the financial resources to progress to tender in a timely and efficient manner.

Mr. Liam Burke: Whitecross School is situated 8 km south of Drogheda. In 2002 I began as school principal in Whitecross. We had six teachers and 171 pupils at that time. There are now more than 430 pupils and 23 teachers. House building projects were beginning in the Julianstown and south Drogheda area by 2004. Our numbers were rising and it was evident that with four suitable classrooms and two unsuitable classrooms our school would need to get on the building ladder. Between 2004 and up to the present the board and I have highlighted the very unsatisfactory working conditions for staff and pupils. We have met and written to several public representatives. We have met with two education Ministers. We have lobbied and lobbied, but we still do not have our building.

As for the present conditions, there are 26 external doors on our collection of buildings. Anyone has open access to the school, from a very busy main road; the school cannot be locked down.

On three occasions rats - not mice - were caught within school buildings. I personally dispatched one on the latest occasion, which occurred in the least suitable prefab block on the campus, during class time in a bathroom between two classrooms. An even more serious incident occurred last year when a storage heater fell off a wall in first class, in the same classroom. This happened just after the children left the room. The heater weighs some 200 kg.

Continual maintenance and IT issues have to be addressed. Heating bills are astronomical as each prefab has its own system with no central control. There is *ad hoc* wiring in most classrooms to cater for increased IT and system needs. We are in limbo when it comes to upgrading or even maintaining school facilities as we are continually expecting the project to begin. The board cannot justify spending funds on upgrades for a building that is due to be revamped. Pupils and teachers often have to go to classrooms in wet or cold weather for classes. This is particularly the case for special needs pupils. In fact, I feel pupils and staff in Whitecross can justifiably feel discriminated against in comparison to pupils and staff in all other schools in our locality.

There is no formal staff room; we use a learning support room during break which has to cater for up to 30 staff in a room of 20 square metres. Neither is there a formal meeting room for teachers, parents, social workers or inspectors.

Of the 16 classrooms in the school I deem only four suitable to deliver the present national curriculum for primary schools.

We pride ourselves on success in sport at Whitecross, yet we do not have any indoor facilities appropriate to delivering the PE curriculum. This was a particular issue during the very poor weather in recent months.

Several neighbouring schools were completed in the past ten years within 10 km of Drogheda, including Stamullen national school, Donacarney Boys and Girls, Duleek Boys and Girls, Scoil an Bradán Feasa, Le Chéile in Mornington, St. Mary's Parish primary school and Scoil Oilibhéir Naofa in Bettystown, to name a few. Some of the above schools did not exist when we were originally approved as a major building project. All but two were behind us on any building ladder, if such a thing exists. It seems to have escaped Department officials that the board was tasked with assessing and picking a design team in 2008 for a building project, only for all communication with DES officials from Whitecross to be ignored for months on end. Eventually we found this project was parked due to the recession. One would imagine that our project would then be fast-tracked for round two, but this has not been the case.

The harder the board and I worked to get the project off the ground the less progress we seemed to make. In November 2016 the design team met in Tullamore. The meeting began with a senior Department official criticising Whitecross board members for sharing the history of the schools' endeavours to get the project off the ground with local politicians. The board members present found these comments unacceptable and out of order, but we kept quiet in order not to cause further delay to the project. We have ten prefabs, six of which cost the state €80,000 per annum. The total cost of temporary accommodation to date is over €1.5 million. The initial price projection for this project in 2011 was €2.9 million. Currently the estimated cost is €5.7 million, due to the delay, and I am sure the spend will double before completion.

In March, Whitecross hosted 24 teachers from Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Norway. I was embarrassed having to show these teachers the conditions our pupils and teachers have to put up with, given that Ireland is supposed to be one of the wealthier EU countries, and the fact that all these European teachers worked in much safer and more fit for purpose schools than we do.

All the recent talk in education circles is Children First. As far as I can see it, children are put last in Whitecross School. What difference will my attendance make in progressing the project that our pupils and teachers deserve?

Chairman: The three witnesses have described very challenging sets of conditions for the students in their care, and for the staff working in those schools. There is no doubt that school communities are being impacted very negatively. I now invite members of the committee to put questions forward to the three witnesses, and I will have some questions towards the end. The witnesses will have an opportunity to respond at that point.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I do not have many questions because much of what the witnesses have said speaks for itself. The statements are stark. I am very familiar with Whitecross school. It is one of the nearest schools to me, and many of my neighbours use it. Indeed, one of my family members teaches there. When the committee was asked to pick a school there are a number of schools I am familiar with that have been on building lists for some time, including for example Lismullen, O'Carolan College in Nobber, St. Peter's in Dunboyne, but there is no doubt that Whitecross is the worst school in terms of building in my locality. It is absolutely outrageous. Despite the problems the school is fairly popular. Can Mr. Burke explain that dichotomy?

Can Ms Carr tell us more about the change of location of the bus services?

Senator Grace O'Sullivan: I hope that it is okay that I am speaking ahead of the other members of the committee. I must leave to attend a debate.

Chairman: It is fine. The Senator is substituting for Deputy Catherine Martin.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan: Deputy Martin sincerely apologises for not being able to be here today because of a family bereavement. I know that Deputy Martin has been working with Marie, Ms Carr and the parents of the board of management on the issue. In fact, it was she who asked that the witnesses be brought to this committee. The presentations we heard made this a very worthwhile exercise.

I would also like to mention Gaelscoil Chnoc Laimhna in Knocklyon. Some parents of children at that school are in the Gallery today. Deputy Martin and my Green Party colleague, Francis Duffy, have been working with them to secure a permanent building for that school. It has been in prefabs for 22 years, and a representative was on Drivetime during the week describing horrific conditions. Thanks to Ms Carr, Mr. Burke and Mr. Bergin for their presentations. It is horrifying to listen, in this day and age, to stories of how the economy is growing while the conditions described exist. I admire the persistence and dedication of the witnesses, who are operating under sub-standard conditions.

In the short term, what do each of the schools need to ease the stress of the temporary accommodation? In terms of communications with the Department of Education and Skills, do they feel that the lines of communication are good enough or effective? There have been issues in terms of communication for Ballinteer Educate Together; I understand that announcements about the school were made on Twitter before the school itself was informed. Have communications with the Department improved since the Twitter announcement? Do the schools feel there is an end in sight to the saga that they, their pupils and the families involved have been involved in? How are the schools managing to keep the parents calm? The witnesses must be very frustrated with the whole system and the lack of development.

We have heard the problems associated with the schools represented here. Yesterday I received a call from Tramore Educate Together. It is in my constituency and we are very proud of it. It is being split into two campuses so that it can develop. It is an unworkable and unhealthy

situation in terms of health and wellness. I wanted to bring that to the attention of the committee. We are hearing from three schools today but many schools are facing this problem. I welcome that it is being addressed and I hope the committee will pursue it in the best interests of the pupils, the staff and society in general.

Senator Lynn Ruane: My question is for Ms Carr. My daughter was in a Gaelscoil that had been in temporary accommodation since 1990. They were promised suitable accommodation 28 years ago. I never paid much attention to the impact of that when I dropped her to the prefab and it was only when they moved into the school last year that I could see what the students were missing. I had not tuned in to the impact the temporary accommodation might be having on them. However, when they moved into the school they had access to a hall and could invite parents, and the community, to school plays and concerts to be part of that because they had the space. They also had space for a library in the school, which they did not have previously. I had not thought about any of that at the time.

Ms Carr spoke about the difficult educational environment for pupils. She might expand on that and the impact the temporary accommodation in schools is having on children and what they are missing out on on a daily basis. What stress does it create in the classroom when the pupils are in such a small environment, with all the uncertainty that entails? She might expand on some of the bullet points in her presentation.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I will make a brief point. I am glad the witnesses came before the committee to tell those stories, one of which has been going on for 13 years. There is nothing like hearing at first hand the circumstances in which people find themselves. This is an issue the committee should prioritise because there is little point in members talking about the benefits of education and the great education system we have if we do not have adequate conditions for children in schools.

I fully agree with what Mr. Burke said about children being last. Time and again here I speak about cases where we are failing children. All of us talk about the past and how badly children were treated in the industrial schools yet we seem to be continuing in the same way. It is as though children do not matter.

I believe school is very difficult for many children. It is difficult for parents to send their children to school if they issues to do with a learning difficulty or anxiety. Sending children to schools where the conditions are inadequate is unacceptable. I do not know how the witnesses have put up with them for so long and not closed up and protested at the gates until something was done about the conditions. What is happening is unacceptable. I look forward to members having the opportunity to ask the Department of Education and Skills the reason it can stand over these conditions in this day and age.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the three witnesses for coming before the committee. I have a simple question for each of them. They have described the frustrations, difficulties and so on but what would they like to see changed, particularly in terms of their relationship with the Department, communication and being able to have a say in what is happening, as well as knowing the situation in each of their schools? It is a simple question but most of our questions probably will be for the Department rather than the witnesses.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. The first thing to say is that they are shocking. We are waiting for a Gaelcholáiste to be built in Limerick and I am worried about the delays that might occur in that regard. We have a new school at the university

as well. Is this what will face pupils in years to come?

I cannot imagine the impact this problem has had on the witnesses' staff over the years and I would like to hear more from them about that. I imagine they ask each month how the school is doing and when the new build will happen but the months turn into years and even decades. It is stunning. Along with my colleagues, I look forward to talking to the Department after the witnesses' presentations but it is important that the committee hears about the impact of this on their colleagues in the teaching profession.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: It is disappointing to hear the witnesses' comments. I do not know whether they are engaging with the Department on timeframes for works to be carried out. I would be interested to hear where the Department is coming from on this issue.

Chairman: The committee chose three samples where there has been inconsistency regarding commitments made by the Department and in respect of the delivery. Listening to the three presentations I was struck by their passionate enthusiasm for the school community, the students they teach and the school staff.

I had the opportunity to talk to some of the staff in St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin about the impact this issue had on them, which Senator Ruane rightly pointed out. Mr. Burke mentioned it also in his submission in terms of thanking the teachers for teaching in a Third World-type situation. The same is true for the school in Monasterevin and, I have no doubt, for the school in Ballinteer. Teachers do not have a place where they can correct copy books and must sit in a car to do that. At the same time, there are 44 members of staff and there are only 17 car park spaces. Of those 44 teachers, 43 of them must drive to get to the school so the cars cannot even park in the car park. One could say that is only one part of the problem but when the teachers are dedicated to nurturing their students both in terms of the subjects they teach and the extracurricular subjects, it is very disheartening for them to have to do that in a cramped environment that has major health and safety implications.

As we know from the documentation we were presented with from Monasterevin, in 2004, the Department said the school was structurally unsound. That was 14 years ago, and the school has almost twice the number of students now. It has two cubicles for almost 200 boys. One can imagine the impact of that on the young men and their parents, who have said their sons are afraid to go to the toilet during the school day. That adds its own level of frustration in addition to the physical aspect.

There are many elements in the submissions the witnesses have presented. I know the entire school community feels very let down in respect of commitments that have been made.

My next question is to do with all the schools. Mr. Bergin asked a specific question about having a dedicated project manager, something we will put to the Department later. I would like to hear the witnesses' experience of dealing with a dedicated project manager on all the issues. We accept that issues sometimes come into play regarding planning, pipelines, as we know in terms of Irish Water, and so on. However, once those are dealt with, I refer to other unavoidable delays that occur for which there is not a proper explanation and the issue of communication is crucial. That was touched on previously regarding the timely communications the school would receive from the Department. The witnesses also deal with the board, the school community and parents and it is crucial for them to be able to respond to all of those on the specifics in a timely and informed manner.

I will revert to the witnesses and they can make comments. There will be an opportunity for everybody else to come in again at that point. Who wishes to respond first?

Mr. Liam Burke: Deputy Thomas Byrne asked a question on the reason the children are so happy and that teachers are satisfied with the situation. We have a very positive culture in the school. We have younger staff who are probably not as cynical as older people like myself. We have grown from a six-teacher school to a 23-teacher school. The building has been in the pipeline throughout that time but I note we have space. There is no site issue, for example. We have a culture of respect in our school.

Communication was mentioned. I have always updated parents on this matter. They know where we stand and what the issues are, and they know when we have had a meeting with a politician or someone else. The parents are beginning to lose patience. Part of the problem with parents is that the school is a transient issue for them. It is not transient for our staff. We have been in this process for 14 or 15 years and our staff are getting tired of the whole thing. At the same time, our morale is still high. The management team and I are responsible for that. However, we need to see some movement on this issue in the very near future.

Ms Muireann Carr: Deputy Thomas Byrne asked me to expand on the bus issue. When our school moved to its second temporary campus we moved out of our original catchment area. It was more than 3 km from where many of our parents lived. The parent-teacher association, PTA, organised a bus that might help to facilitate those parents who had been displaced or who now had to travel to school from much farther away. Each parent put an application in to see if they could get the bus, and even though enough applications were received, the bus would not be facilitated. That was one issue we faced during the change from one temporary campus to another.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan asked what could be done to ease the stress and difficulty we would face in temporary accommodation. We found the communication from the Department to be lacking. It would not solve our difficulties on its own but better communication would help. We found out via a Deputy's Twitter account that we were moving to the Notre Dame campus. We had not been informed about that. It was announced and heralded as a great thing, but the school was not aware of it. The parent body was very shocked, as was the management body. We had never heard of this before.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: When was that tweet sent?

Ms Muireann Carr: I believe it was last September.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Which Deputy sent the tweet?

Ms Muireann Carr: Am I allowed to say?

Chairman: The witness may have a private conversation after the meeting, but please do not name names here.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I would like to find out.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: It is in the public domain already.

Ms Muireann Carr: That was a big issue. An acknowledgement of the difficulties we are facing would be good. I should say that our new temporary accommodation is shared with two other schools, which presents its own logistical difficulties, such as timetabling for the hall. We

are on the same campus as a secondary school and we have no access to the hall or the yard while that school's official exams are on. Things like that can present huge difficulties for the children. Some support, better communication and acknowledgement of what is going to go on would help.

Mr. Brian Bergin: Senator Gavan asked about the impact on staff. It has been a rollercoaster of emotions for staff. Initially there was excitement. We showed them plans for their rooms and told them that we had received phone calls to say that something was going to happen soon, but since then there has been delay after delay and disappointment after disappointment. Our staff has grown from 20 when we first featured in a list in 2005 to 44. The school population has similarly grown by just over 100%. Finding space to work is a difficulty in our school. We just do not have the space to put on additional classes. We have converted a storeroom to educate local programme refugees in a local hotel while they are on an orientation programme. Heating prefabricated buildings is a nightmare. They are roasting during summer and freezing during winter. Some days the heating is on and some days it is off depending on whether a student hits a switch. It is a credit to staff that they rise above the facility to deliver quality education for the students. They are wonderful. The students are also wonderful because they accept it. It is sometimes embarrassing when staff take students away to other schools because they cannot believe the facilities those other schools have. I am talking about local schools which were on the same list we were on in 2005. They were built in 2010 or 2011. At best our school will be built in 2021. This all comes down to the site and the lack of care in the identification of that site, and indeed a lack of the required focus from the Department to drive our project forward.

The Chair asked about a dedicated project manager. I feel like the project manager, but I am powerless. Imagine that. I am the person phoning the design team. I am the person phoning site acquisitions. I am the person phoning the major project section. I am the person phoning politicians. I am the person phoning the chair of the board of management and the chair of the parents' council.

Chairman: Is the witness saying that there is no dedicated project manager within the Department?

Mr. Brian Bergin: Nobody has ever written to me to say that he or she is the project manager. Many people have taken on different roles, and they have all been very competent, but there is no overall co-ordination. I get the sense that if I were part of an education and training board, this would all be done in an instant.

Communication with the Department of Education and Skills was mentioned. We are all familiar with the phrase "commercially sensitive". We have been told that we are at the top of its priority list, and that we should be thankful we are on a list. How many lists do we need to be on? I am getting a bit emotional about this because it has been hell. Managing the expectations of the community is really difficult. We changed electoral boundaries. We were in Kildare, then we were in Laois, and now we are back in Kildare again. That has not helped matters for us at all. We feel neglected, and that is really sad.

It could be improved if all of the State agencies could come together in advance to decide on where we should build the school and even if the school is required. The Department has the demographic information at its disposal, and it knows where new schools are going to be needed. Why is it not working proactively to identify sites that do not cause the problems we have identified? At what stage will the Department decide that a site is no longer worth pursuing and that a different one is required so that the build happens faster?

Chairman: Mr. Bergin is correct that there seems to be a complete lack of collaboration between State stakeholders and inconsistency in the way projects are rolled out. I smiled ironically when Mr. Bergin said that he was told that his school was fortunate to be on a list. South Kildare was on the list in 2015 for another secondary school, as Mr. Bergin knows, but it dropped off the list. Sometimes being on a list means nothing further down the line, which is very regrettable.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In 2010, a design team was appointed to Mr. Burke's school. Many of the schools in his area, in the two neighbouring parishes, the coastal area and Duleek, were at similar stages. Can Mr. Burke offer any explanation? Is there any other explanation as to why his school has been left out and everyone else has been sorted out?

Mr. Liam Burke: In the village I live in, lobbying began three years ago. It was agreed that it would be built and that school in Termonfeckin is half built now. I pass that school on my way to work every day. It is incomprehensible how that school is getting built while we are still waiting. It is not as big a project but it is similar in size. Work is supposed to start on our school in quarter 1 of 2019. However, I am tired of telling parents that work will begin in six months or in one year. The sad thing for me is that I meet my student council every two weeks, and the first thing they ask is when the building will begin. I have been answering that question since 2006. We were probably one of the first primary schools to have a student council back in 2002. It is an exercise in utter frustration.

I hope that we do begin in quarter one of 2019. There are lessons to be learned in terms of communication. Communication with the Department of Education and Skills is appalling. I have an outstanding communication from 15 January consisting of two letters and three emails around the question on prefabs. I await a clear answer on that matter. That is just one example. All communication broke down completely in 2008 when we had our first design team. There are lessons to be learned about communication and proper priority for schools. Schools should be given a building according to their needs, but, as Deputy Thomas Byrne alluded to, there is no priority. We need everything to be more systematic. The systems in place should be as one would have them in the private sector.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I apologise to the delegates for missing their presentations, but I had to attend another meeting.

I am here because Monasterevin is in my constituency. I acknowledge the role of the Chairman in facilitating this meeting, thus allowing important points to be raised.

I am very familiar with St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin. I am also aware of the work done by Mr. Bergin, as well as the distress he, his staff and the community in general have experienced. My main focus is on hearing what the officials have to say, questioning them and holding them to account. Each of the cases in the specific schools is personal to the delegates who want this meeting to produce results, either today or in the very near future. However, the committee must learn from the mistakes made because there is a crossover in the experiences of each school.

Earlier I listened to the delegates speak on the radio and some of the same points were made about a lack of communication and the stress caused for the principals. I have no doubt that the members of the committee will take all of the points made on board and try to improve the processes used in order that other principals and parents' associations will not have to go through the same experience.

On the specific challenges faced by St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin and how the situation has continued for as long for a litany of reasons, it has been harrowing to listen to the tales of frustration voiced at public meetings in recent times. I can only imagine the stress Mr. Bergin has experienced in trying to handle his frustrated staff, whom I have met, who must work in substandard conditions. As he said, the pupils do not know any better and accept the situation. I agree with him that they are entitled to so much more and well believe the conditions are a huge source of frustration. I want to make sure we will hold the officials to account. While the issue is very personal, I am sure the same is true for the other schools. St. Paul's secondary school's piece is important for all of south Kildare owing to the knock-on impact on surrounding towns and areas. Every day buses loaded with pupils leave Monasterevin to travel to other schools because a new school has not been built in the town. I look forward to hearing what the officials have to say and thank them for their attendance.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am sorry for being late, but I had to attend another meeting.

I empathise with what the delegates have said. It sounds all too familiar and that is the difficulty. A number of us are due to attend a meeting tonight in our own area where the children attending the local school have been educated in prefabs for 22 years. The pattern is similar to some of the stories that have been outlined, including the communication difficulties. I know of a school in my constituency that was at the top of the list. The building project was to move to construction the next year, but then it disappeared from the list and I have not been given an explanation. I do not have one for the parents I shall meet tonight. Neither do I have an explanation for the pupils, their parents and the teachers in the schools we are discussing. There is something wrong when we, as elected representatives, have not been given an explanation. At one stage I was my party's spokesperson on education. Other members have a background in education and so on. It is a blank canvas when it comes to trying to find out where one's school is and whether there has been progress made. The problem is not just that there is a lack of information or communication. Can the delegates recommend to the committee ways by which the position can be improved? What is the best way forward? Everyone wants a silver bullet and to be told that their school project will go ahead or is on track, but it should not be like that. The system should be fair, open and transparent. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Chairman: We seek equity and fairness. If a school project appears on the list, there is an expectation that it will be delivered. There is a sense of sheer frustration in schools and communities and among parents. There are parents present who know what the reality is. When their children started in first year, there was a sense that they were trying to work together. Unfortunately, so much time has elapsed that their children are now in third level education or working. In some cases, entire families and an entire school generation have left a school without any progress being made in the provision of new accommodation. There is something radically wrong with the system which we must put right. I also know that we must work with the Department to resolve the matter. Political will is needed to solve the problem. If the three delegates do not have anything further to add, I shall relieve them of their duties for now. I thank them for attending. They have made very valuable contributions on behalf of their respective schools and communities but also on behalf of the school community within the country. They have given us a better understanding of the gaps and problems in the system and made recommendations.

Does Deputy John Lahart wish to comment?

Deputy John Lahart: No.

Chairman: Is the Deputy sure?

Deputy John Lahart: Yes, positive.

Chairman: The committee will make recommendations to the Minister, not just in respect of the specific schools but in general in order to make sure we will not encounter these issues again. On behalf of the committee, I thank Ms Carr, Mr. Bergin and Mr. Burke for their attendance.

Sitting suspended at 4.55 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to please turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode.

The purpose of this part of the meeting is to have an engagement with officials from the Department of Education and Skills on the matter of the lapse in time between the announcement of the construction of new schools and the time at which their construction is completed. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Hubert Loftus, assistant secretary general in the planning and building division in the Department of Education and Skills; Ms Helen O'Neill, technical manager in the professional and technical section of the Department of Education and Skills; and Mr. Brian Power, principal officer in the forward planning section in the Department of Education and Skills. I appreciate the representatives' presence at the earlier session as it will have given them an understanding of the frustration felt by three schools in particular that are representative of other schools experiencing issues. I thank them for attending as they are helping us throw light on the blockages, how we can deal with them and, collectively, go forward in trying to ensure that issues such as these do not arise again. I thank them also for trying to help those three schools to solve their particular issues.

As for the format of the meeting, I will invite the witnesses to make brief opening statements. I thank them for the written submission they gave to the committee. That will be followed by an engagement with members of the committee. I assume all three witnesses will make a brief statement.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: There will be just one opening statement. I will make that.

Chairman: There will be an opportunity then for members to have an engagement with Mr. Power and Ms O'Neill.

Before we begin, I wish to draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any opening statement submitted to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting, together with the submissions forwarded to the committee secretariat.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call on Mr. Hubert Loftus to make the opening statement on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet with the members today, together with colleagues, to assist the committee in its examination of the timelines involved in the delivery of new schools. I am joined by the following colleagues from the Department's planning and building division: Ms Helen O'Neill, our technical manager in the professional and technical section, and Mr. Brian Power, our principal officer in the forward planning section.

The Department has already provided the committee with a written submission on this topic. Some key points to note from the submission are, first, the overall scale of the school building programme which, during the period from 2010 to 2017, involved the completion of 365 large-scale projects, of which 218 were new school buildings, to provide of the order of 130,000 permanent school places. In addition, more than 1,900 projects were completed during this period under the Department's additional accommodation scheme which resulted in the provision of almost 60,000 school places.

Second, new schools are large-scale projects that involve significant investment. As an example, the cost of delivering a new 16-classroom primary school is of the order of €6.5 million, excluding site costs, and of the order of €22 million for a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school. The planning and delivery of large-scale projects is managed as part of the multi-annual school building programme. The delivery process for a new school typically involves site identification and acquisition prior to the appointment of a design team, progression through architectural design, including planning permission, and then tender and construction.

Third, throughout all stages of this delivery process, there are a range of factors and external dependencies outside the Department's control that can impact on delivery timelines on individual projects and the ability to achieve the Department's published indicative timelines for same. Delays can occur in site acquisition, planning, design and construction. The Department keeps in regular contact with schools regarding such matters.

Fourth, as part of ongoing efforts to improve and streamline information on its website, a single list has been published on the Department's website that sets out in county order the current status of all large-scale projects being delivered as part of the school building programme. This list will be updated on a regular basis - every month - to reflect the progression of projects through architectural design, tender and construction as part of the €8.4 billion investment in school buildings under the National Development Plan 2018-2027.

In its published work programme, the committee indicated that it wanted the Department's forward planning section to be part of the discussion on this topic. The role of this section is to analyse demographic and enrolment trends and anticipate future demand for school places. It uses a geographical information system, GIS, to assist it with this work. Brian Power, principal officer, is available to talk to the members in more detail on the work of the forward planning section.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to invite the committee to the Department's planning and building division in Tullamore to see at first hand how new schools are planned and delivered, including getting an overview on the geographic information system that is used for planning school provision, and the delivery of school building projects and the various delivery mechanisms that are used for same.

I am happy to answer further questions arising and welcome discussion of the issues. I am conscious that the representatives of three schools who were before the committee earlier raised issues about communication and contact and progression of their projects. We can deal with that as part of questions from the members.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Loftus. I appreciate that. Can I say, without having consulted with my fellow members, that we will be very happy to take him up on his offer of a meeting in Tullamore to examine the forward planning area? That would be very helpful. I thank him also for the offer to respond on the particular issues in the three schools because when I saw the submission from the Department I was disappointed that there was no reference to the three schools when they gave up their school day to attend to discuss the issues. I appreciate it that there will be an opportunity to raise those questions, which we will do.

Before I ask my own questions I will go back to the members. I call Senator Ruane.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I will ask questions on behalf of Deputy Catherine Martin, who had a bereavement today and asked me to put them to the witnesses, but I have a question of my own at the outset. It concerns Mr. Loftus's presentation in which he said that the Department of Education and Skills is in regular contact with the schools. That seems to be in direct conflict with the common experience of almost all of the schools that report that communication is a huge issue. Can the delegates reconcile their experience with what they have said in their statement?

Deputy Catherine Murphy's first question was whether the delegates understood the scepticism and anger of the parents, staff and students of the schools. She referred, in particular, to Ballinteer Educate Together national school which has been without a permanent home for six years and Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna which has been located in prefabs for the past 22 years. Do the delegates understand the frustration and hurt the parents, staff and students felt when the Minister announced 42 new schools, some of which are to open as early as next year?

Much of the submission deals with the issues of site acquisition and planning, to which I will return, but regardless of them, there is no excuse for poor communication. Ballinteer Educate Together national school learned from a tweet that it was to move, as we heard in the earlier session. It has been kept in the dark and is relying on public representatives to request information for it. That should not be the case. What measures are the delegates taking to ensure there are adequate lines of communication with schools to ensure they are not kept in the dark or do not learn important information from third parties?

On the issue of site acquisition, what steps is the Department taking to ensure the State lands gifted to religious bodies for community purposes will remain in use for those purposes? That issue has arisen in Deputy Catherine Martin's constituency in Our Lady's Grove primary school in Goatstown. In Senator Grace O'Sullivan's area of Waterford the Educate Together school in Tramore is facing being split on two sites, which would be impossible from a health and safety perspective. That is happening while two existing school buildings, Stella Maris and the Christian Brothers school, CBS, lie empty. Are efforts being made to ensure compulsory purchase order, CPO, powers can be used in a fair manner to protect children's futures?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I want to ask the fundamental question about the three schools. What is the current position? They have acknowledged communications, but most schools would overlook all of the past problems if they could get reliable information on when their projects would go ahead.

I have a number of other questions. I ask one of the delegates to describe the geographic information system in more detail. Is it a computer programme? Is it based on the Haase index in the Department with responsibility for rural affairs, which is based on a system devised by a foreign academic, or what is it? Is it something I can buy in a shop or just the way the Department looks at figures? I want more detail on it.

Regarding some other school projects in my area, I have mentioned Scoil na Tríonóide in Lismullin which is very similar to Whitecross national school in that it is mainly prefabs and has been on the list almost as long as it. I would like to receive some information on the school. I highlight how bad the conditions are in the school which, although in a rural area, is situated in an area of expansion in the hinterland of Navan.

I want to inquire about the position on three schools in Dunboyne, namely, Dunboyne junior and senior national schools and St. Peter's national school. In the case of St. Peter's national school, has the site acquisition process been completed?

We have discussed Eureka secondary school previously. As it is part of the Carillion set-up, there is not much the delegates can add today, as representatives of the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, are not present.

I also mention Franciscan College in Gormanston and O'Carolan College in Nobber. There is a range of schools on the list, some of which are in dire need. My concern is that the budget is not sufficient. I do not know whether the officials can comment on this, but the list published last Friday - I do not quibble with it - has a price tag, without land costs, of approximately €500 million. What will be the impact? *The Irish Times* reported that, effectively, the promoters of 575 projects were being told that they would not be able to go ahead. We need to hear a comment on this. They include all of the schools I have mentioned.

Can the delegates reply on the list published last Friday? For how many of the projects have sites been acquired, if any? Certain areas are not included in the list. I was surprised to see that Ashbourne had not been included for the provision of a new school. I am sorry to be specific, but this applies to other areas also. The locations of some of the schools announced are extremely vague. For example, the one with which I am most familiar is the Drogheda-Laytown catchment area. It could extend anywhere from Clogherhead to Gormanston to Slane and Duleek. It is a massive area. I have suggested to the officials previously that a secondary school could be located in Duleek. Has the Department looked in detail at that catchment area? I am glad that it has acknowledged that there is a need for a school in the area, but has it been examined in detail? Will the delegates outline the position because many parents want to know where the school will be located? From talking to colleagues throughout the country I am aware that the Galway city-Oranmore regional solution has also been listed. The reference to Enfield is specific, but there is a lack of specifics in the case of some areas, for example, Kilcoole and Greystones. The villages of Kilcoole and Newtownmountkennedy are not that far apart, but they are separate. However, they are listed as together. If the delegates cannot provide clarity today - I am particularly interested in the Drogheda-Laytown catchment area - when will they be able to provide it in order that parents will be able to make informed decisions?

In terms of places at primary level in September 2019, parents will have been carefully considering the schools to which they should send their children. We know that a new school will be established, which will probably be welcomed by many of them if they are having problems in finding a place. In terms of places at second level, presumably children now in fifth class will be able to attend some of the schools to be established in 2019, but they are already looking at

other schools in their areas. There is a particular reason I mentioned Drogheda and Laytown. Depending on where the school is located, many children will not be interested because it will be in the wrong area as it is such a large catchment area. I assume the same applies to the Galway city-Oranmore solution. If the school is placed in one side of the area, it will attract children in that area but not from others. As parents currently cannot make that decision, we need a timeline as to when decisions will be made, if they have not already been made.

Chairman: I have no doubt that the delegates will not have all of the information to hand on the schools about which we have asked, but it would be appreciated if they corresponded with the clerk to the committee within the next week or so. We will circulate the answers to any of the queries on which they do not have the information to hand.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The question I put in the first session was what the three schools would like to see changed in terms of communication and so on. I put that question to the Department. The particular schools represented before the committee today are ones that have experienced long delays. There are many others on the list the delegates gave us that have not experienced long delays, but for those that have, will the Department consider having some kind of special communication system, whereby there would either be a project manager or a dedicated person to whom they could go when they had questions? That would be helpful. Obviously, it would not solve the problem for them, but at least they would have somebody to whom they could go. I want to put that proposal first to the Department and receive a response from it.

On site selection, there was an issue with the site for Mr. Bergin's school, in particular. It started off as a public private partnership. I do not know whether that was an issue or whether it makes it different in terms of site selection. I believe he said in frustration that if his was an education and training board, ETB, school, he would have a quicker solution.

In its submission the Department outlines the three main ways by which it purchases a site - through local authorities, by direct negotiation and through ETBs. If a school is not an ETB school and the local authority does not have a site, does it cause particular difficulties? Will the delegates address again some of the concerns expressed by the school about that issue?

The phrase "site sensitive" is used frequently when a new site is being purchased. To give an example in my constituency - Senator Paul Gavan referred to it also - there are two new post-primary schools in Limerick; one of which was opened last September, while the other will open next September. One has been built on a site owned by the local authority; therefore, there are no difficulties with it and there is clarity and so on. However, in the case of the other on the eastern side of the city, site acquisition is ongoing. When one asks a question, one is told that the issue is sensitive but that discussions are taking place with the local authority, etc. Is there any way that there can be any more clarity on those ones because it is very frustrating? Does the Department give a bit more information to school management than would be generally publicly available or can it do that? The most frustrating thing can often be the fact that nobody knows why there is a delay or what the problem is with regard to sites. Clarity would help a lot in these situations. The witnesses have said that they cannot answer questions on specific projects today but at some stage I would like more information on the post-primary school in Limerick that will be under the patronage of Educate Together. That school is going to open in September but I am seeking information about the identification of a site so that a permanent building can be progressed.

I also seek more clarity on the devolved scheme. I know that some projects are done by way

of a devolved system and that seems to be quicker. I seek some general information on whether schools can opt for that and if so, whether it would speed things up for them. It was announced this week that the Department is updating its website with information on the current status of all large-scale projects being delivered as part of the schools building programme. What extra information will be on the website that is not currently on it?

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: My apologies, but I had to step out of the meeting earlier and missed what the witnesses said. The point I was making earlier to the schools representatives is that there is no plausible excuse for children being taught in substandard schools in this day and age. Obviously prefabs are a temporary solution in certain schools but the conditions the schools representatives were describing could not possibly comply with normal health and safety standards. If something tragic was to happen to a child, would everything be solved all of a sudden? I fear that is the case and that it might have to get to that point before the issue is taken seriously.

Are health and safety inspections carried out on temporary accommodation? Has the Department done an audit of the schools that are in a really dire state? Can those schools be prioritised? There is no point in the Department announcing the building of 42 new schools when so many existing schools are on a list, waiting. Let us deal with this issue first and then deal with new schools. The current situation is ridiculous.

A standard timeframe should apply in the context of new schools so that when a new school is announced, it is delivered within two or three years at most. Schools should not fall off the list or go into never-never land for 13 years or more. Common sense is needed here. The school representatives made some very good points earlier. They pointed out that we know what the population is going to be in an area and what the need for school places will be. It is not that the need for a new school arises suddenly and takes the Department by surprise. The issue must be taken more seriously. I would also make the point that issues relating to children do not seem to be on the radar for many Departments, unfortunately.

Senator Paul Gavan: I also want to apologise for having to step out earlier. Unfortunately I and my party colleague had to step out for a few minutes to attend a meeting. I would like to listen to the answers provided by the witnesses and respond then, if that is okay.

Chairman: That is fine. Deputy Lahart is next.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the officials for their attendance. I am essentially going to be repeating some of the comments that my colleagues have made but will be inserting the names of different schools. I would be very surprised if the officials did not come here with some kind of briefing on Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna given that it has been highlighted on the airwaves in the past week, particularly by parents. The Department was alive to those interventions by parents because it responded on the airwaves directly to one of the requests that was made. I will return to that presently.

I wish to reinforce the points made earlier with regard to communications. I am a public representative, as are my colleagues here, and it is worth revisiting what that means. I am elected, along with four colleagues in Dublin South West, to represent the people of that area. One assumes that when one submits a question or series of questions on a project and does so regularly in the Dáil Chamber by way of parliamentary question, or Topical Issue matter - which brings it very much to the notice of the Minister and his or her officials - or during the Order of Business, that the Department should then be aware and alive to the fact that the project in

question is giving rise to a lot of concern. As a public representative, I was pretty surprised that the Department confirmed on the airwaves the position with regard to the site acquisition issue with South Dublin County Council but did not provide me with any formal notification on same. That is pretty appalling communication.

School principals are busy enough as it is without having to deal with bad conditions. I am not going to go into the details regarding the conditions at Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna because the officials will already be familiar with the case. School principals are very busy people anyway but many have to spend a great deal of time fruitlessly chasing departmental officials in an effort to find answers. Today I had to submit a freedom of information request, which really is the last resort for a public representative, to try to find out as much information as possible about the communications between the Department and the local authority because it is the local authority that owns the site.

My specific questions for the officials relate to the status of the school building programme on which Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna appears and the announcement made by the Minister last week with regard to 40 schools. Where does the school stand *vis-à-vis* the six-year school building programme? There are questions allied to that which Deputy Thomas Byrne has raised regarding the funding implications arising from the addition of 40 projects to the programme. I would like to know before we leave here this evening the status of the school building programme 2015 to 2021 and the projects included in it to which the Department committed. Does that programme still stand? I ask because it has been deleted from the Department's website. Is that related to the refurbishment and updating of the website? The programme is not accessible on the Department's website which is a real problem and a serious communication issue.

I understand to some degree the issue around commercial sensitivity but I would also like a definition of same. The commercial sensitivity argument is thrown out there a lot. What does that constitute from the Department's perspective, particularly when it is dealing with a local authority? The argument does not apply in this particular case but it does apply in others.

Included among the 40 projects announced last week is a post-primary school project in City West. Has a site been acquired for that? I do not believe one has been acquired as yet. In that context, how can the Department announce a project when negotiations regarding site selection and purchase have not even begun? Site selection and purchase are prerequisites before a sod can be turned.

Is Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna to proceed? Is that building project going to proceed and if so, when? I also seek specific answers regarding communications. In mid-January 2018 an engineer's report was to be submitted to the building and planning section of the Department but that has not happened. In February the process of selecting a design team was to begin but that has not happened. On 9 March, according to the building and planning section, the report would be submitted but that has not happened. On 9 March a schedule of accommodation arrived at the school which was a generic template for a 16-room primary school and not specific to Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna. Currently there is no date for the engineer's report to be submitted. The timeline provided by the Department's building and planning section on 29 November 2017 is no longer valid. In spite of multiple calls and communications from the school and public representatives about the timelines committed to by the Department when it met with the school, timelines which it failed to meet, which is one issue, it failed to explain why it has missed all those timelines and to reply in writing or orally, which leaves a bad taste in the mouths of parents and the principal, and of the board of management.

What is the political input into school project selection? When the officials present a suite of school projects and it goes up to the Minister's desk, is that the same suite of school projects that leaves the Minister's office for publication thereafter?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the officials for coming in. I expect specific details about the schools present because the cases have been well flagged. Whatever other schools were raised, the schools that are here that have given up their day are entitled to some clear answers. I will start on communication. Do the witnesses accept that the communication for the planning and building unit and in general could be better? Have they plans to address that? As a politician, I spend much of my time on the phone, on my emails and asking parliamentary questions, as I am sure every member of this committee does. I think of the public meetings I have been at in Monasterevin where I, all the Oireachtas Members from Kildare South and seven or eight councillors are hauled in together and asked the same questions. We all go back and try to find the same answers. I imagine if the process was streamlined that it would take the frustration out of it for schools and improve communication and it would save the witnesses time too. Much time must be taken up in the Department answering our queries and questions. We get those queries and questions because the information is not being provided the school. We would all, as politicians, be happier if the schools had adequate information and were clearer and happier about that. It would solve some of those issues.

With regard to the role of principals, it is a simple fact that principals are here today fighting for a new school. Extra-curricular activity is happening in those schools right now. Earlier today, there was a normal timetable of classes in all of those schools. There was a full staff room at lunch time and break time. All of the normal activity is going on and the principal has lost another day fighting for a new school instead of being there to deal with those staff and the care of and ongoing engagement with the pupils. This has been the case for years with these schools for a litany of different reasons. The frustration is palpable and the frustration for us as politicians is equally high because it is so unfair to see what some schools have to go through. Others take it for granted that they get their new school in a really straightforward way, but for those who do not, it is hell on earth for all involved, from the staff, to parents to pupils, to the principal, to the board of management. Nobody is free of that.

On St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin, which is in my constituency, will the witnesses clarify that the St. Paul's project has not in any way been delayed by last week's announcement? That was on social media over the weekend and it caused much concern and distress. I do not believe that is the case but I want clarification from officials that the project and the other school projects are on their own trajectory. I hope the witnesses will give reassurances here that the Department is doing everything to deliver that as soon as is humanly possible.

I understand the different ways that sites are acquired. Is it the case that St. Paul's in Monasterevin was the first time that the Department engaged with Kildare County Council, with the council sourcing the site? If it was not the first, it was one of the first. If so, have lessons been learned from the experience? Something obviously went very wrong here. We are in 2018 and we are still only at stage 2b. What lessons have been learned from that? Can the witnesses give clarity about the status of the site now? Has it been purchased? Is there any concern on the part of the Department that there will be any further delays with the site?

In the most recent correspondence from the Department to the school, the profiling for the start of construction for St. Paul's in Monasterevin is down as quarter 3 of 2019. Days before the Department issued that, the design team for the school had set a trajectory, with all the ducks lined up, with no reason that the school could not start construction in quarter 1 of 2019. It

might sound like a moot point but it certainly is not to the parents, staff and pupils in Monasterevin. Six months is an eternity. Mr. Loftus outlined in his initial presentation that delays can happen. I accept that delays can happen. They can happen at planning and at acquisition. Unfortunately for St. Paul's, it seems to have happened at every stage. I hope that the Department of Education and Skills is not factoring in extra time to allow for that. I hope that it is full steam ahead to deliver the school as soon as possible. If delays happen, we need clear communication as to why they have happened and what the problem is. Explain why we cannot start construction in quarter 1 of 2019. I do not want to see any sense that the Department is building in extra time. Will the witnesses explain why they think quarter 3 of 2019 is the earliest possible and is there any way we can claim back some of that time?

Chairman: I have a few questions, including specific questions about St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin. In my role as Chair, I have some questions relating to the overall delivery within the country. I have about seven of those so I propose to go to them first. I have a question about the Department's rapid building programme, the time savings between this process and the ordinary process, and how schools are selected for that. For many, that is an important roadmap for how they can go about delivering a school in a timely fashion.

Has the Department reviewed its project management process? We listened to many shortcomings about that important process. I assume that, by listening to the earlier session, the witnesses have learned about many areas for improvement. Have they assessed any of these? I think I know the answer to this from earlier but I want to put the question because it is important to get an answer. Is a dedicated project manager assigned for each project, empowered to access all relevant information across all stakeholders, who can keep the principal and the school sufficiently informed and ensure timelines are met? That is crucial. I know that Mr. Brian Bergin commented, regarding his stakeholders, about the purpose of parliamentary questions. That touches on what Deputy Heydon said. We all submit questions and get the same answers. If all Oireachtas Members in the constituency were given the same information at the same time as the principal so that we can all work together, it would cut out some of the extra work. If something lands on Mr. Bergin's desk, then he has to do a full round of consultation and get everybody together. It could be completely streamlined.

Has an analysis been undertaken to determine the efficiency of using prefabs? We listened to stark figures earlier about their cost. One of the last parliamentary questions I submitted about St. Paul's secondary school was maybe three weeks ago. The fact that St. Paul's was told to apply for temporary accommodation, for three prefabs, again for this year seems to be such a waste of money. When a new school is built, the prefabs are redundant and much money has gone into them. It has proven difficult for communities to access and use those prefabs. That is an area to address.

On the perceived lack of communication from the Department during individual processes and projects, what systems are in place in the Department to ensure a high level of communication for ongoing projects? That is a similar point to that of project management. Will a witness from the Department, whether Mr. Loftus or a colleague, expand further on potential delays in awaiting planning permission? How can further efficiencies be achieved through ongoing collaboration with local authorities?

It must be 15 years since I was a member of Kildare County Council. At that stage, Monasterevin was in the municipal district. It was subsequently made part of a different district. However, 15 years ago, I, along with other councillors and a number of local authority officials, sat down with the order in Moore Abbey to look at the potential sites that were there. That was

2003 and the school got the go-ahead in 2005. It seems that an inordinate amount of time has passed but I accept that problems arose in respect of planning permission. Thankfully, those problems have been dealt with but only since last summer.

On the question of communications, how does the Department ensure consistency and effective knowledge transfer between its various sections regarding ongoing building projects? There are eight sections within the Department's planning and building unit and there is a relatively large turnover of personnel. One can deal with somebody who has a lot of corporate knowledge but he or she is then moved, retires or goes to another area. Straight away, one must start building relationships again. That represents a huge amount of time invested by so many different people.

The final general question I want to ask concerns the geographic information system, GIS, and about how effective it is, working in tandem with the local authority's projections, in predicting where additional accommodation will be needed. I know Deputy Thomas Byrne inquired about this. Has there been any instance where accommodation needs have been identified incorrectly? Does the system enable increased lead-in times for planning and delivery? Do the schools still have to alert the Department to accommodation needs or are the relevant schools identified by the GIS? Last Friday morning, the list of schools was mentioned. I know we have had several conversations on this with Mr. Power in particular over the past two years. I absolutely accept that the published list will not impact in any way on St. Paul's' and the delivery of the project there. However, I cannot for the life of me understand how, with the exception of St. Paul's, south Kildare, having been on it in 2015, has been left off the list. Kildare has one of the fastest-growing populations in the country. It is certainly going to accommodate a lot of the building needed to support families in their quest for homes. Among the age groups we are talking about, the rate of population growth in the area comprising Kildare town, Newbridge and Kilcullen has been 146% of that relating to the State. Among children between ages five and 12, the growth rate has been of the order of 206%. We have identified at least 400 students who will not have secondary school accommodation in seven years' time. Even at this point, people are scrambling try to get places for their children for September of this year. I have concerns about the GIS.

To go to back to St. Paul's and leaving aside for a moment the historical reasons why we are in the position in which we find ourselves, we are led to believe that the current situation arose as a result of the signing of the lease and the accompanying legal complexities. This site was looked at 15 years ago. It was agreed in 2005 that St. Paul's and Monasterevin would have a new school. We have overcome all of the difficulties thrown up by the planning process but a lease has still not been signed. I want a straight answer. Has the lease been signed? If not, when do the witnesses expect it to be signed? Why is there a hold-up? If we are at the end game regarding the signing of this lease, why could the start date not have been earlier than the fourth quarter of last year?

There is plenty I can say about other schools, particularly the Curragh girls national school and the Curragh boys national school. I know we will have other conversations about those. However, I want to put on the record that the primary school buildings in the Curragh are absolutely not fit for purpose. They would fail every health and safety test. If any type of commercial property was in this condition, it would be closed down immediately. There are also small rural schools, such as Ballyshannon national school, which badly need extensions.

My final point concerns autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units. We are very far behind in this regard. In Kildare, there are 64 ASD units in primary schools and only 18 in secondary

schools. We have a long way to go in terms of the provision of this service. The delays are causing a lot of problems for those children who are now at the point of leaving mainstream primary school. Some of them are having to return to special schools. We are putting them under pressure too. I am talking in particular about Scoil na Naomh Uilig in Newbridge and St. Anne's school in the Curragh. This is a huge problem and it is going to get worse. We are looking at a juggernaut coming down the tracks. I thank the witnesses for listening to all of our concerns.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I will take the lead on some of the questions and Mr. Power will talk about the GIS, as well as Ashbourne and south Kildare. A variety of questions were asked. If it is acceptable, I will pick up on some of the common themes that emerged in the discussion and address any remaining questions afterwards.

On the issue of funding and concerns about projects on this building list, one of my priorities since coming into the job as head of the planning and building division has been dealing with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in respect of funding and the national development plan, NDP. I have been in this job six months, having previously worked in the unit more than ten years ago. I have endeavoured to position the Department so that it can address the twin priorities of dealing with demographics and focusing on refurbishment.

We have a budget of €8.4 billion for the schools sector under the NDP. That compares to the previous ten-year period, for which we had a budget of €4.9 billion. This is a massive increase in funding which positions us to focus on demographics and increase our focus on refurbishment. That translates into very immediate current funding of €540 million in 2018. In 2019, our budget will be in excess of €620 million. That gives us the financial capacity to move things forward.

For decades, there has been underinvestment in public infrastructure in Ireland, not just in schools but across entire areas. There is an element of catching up in spite of a legacy of historic underinvestment. However, much good work is happening and a lot of investment is going in now. The discussion today is about schools but, separate to that, huge investment is going into the higher education sector under the NDP. That sector will receive €2.2 billion in capital investment over the next ten years, compared with €800 million in the previous ten-year period.

To get a sense of the scale of what is happening, members should consider that between €440 million and €450 million worth of large-scale and other projects were under construction at the beginning of this year. That can be compared with previous years. In 2010, the equivalent figure was €130 million. That gives a sense of the funding and investment going into school buildings. However, as I mentioned already, there is an element of catch-up involved.

In regard to transparency, information, communication and related issues, one of the things I was anxious to do was streamline the information on our website. There were multiple lists on our website and they were not being updated. I wanted to simplify that and give everyone, including schools and public representatives, a very clear picture in the form of a county-by-county list setting out the current status of all projects being delivered as part of the schools building programme. That list was updated on our website last week and we will be updating that list of large-scale projects at the end of every month. That gives a clear picture to schools of the current status of their projects.

In terms of giving timelines to tender and construction generally, the learning experience of the Department - hearing from the schools today, there will be various learning experiences - is

that the best period to give certainty to schools of their timeline to tender and construction is when the site issues have been resolved when a project has progressed through planning permission. If one thinks of it, the two key issues that affect projects are having the site and having planning permission. Those issues would have impacted on some of the schools that the committee had before it today.

In recent weeks, we would have issued individual letters to more than 50 schools that had their detailed design done - a bit like Whitecross and St. Paul's - giving them clarity and setting out the action plan or pathway for each of those projects progressing through prequalification of contractors and tender through to the construction. Those letters would have set out a timeline which invariably involves going to construction either over the course of 2018 or into 2019. That gives the clarity to those individual schools.

I accept we do not do everything perfectly in the Department. We have a centralised unit in Tullamore and there are 4,000 schools feeding into us. It is not feasible for us to have the perfect individualised service to each and every school but there is some learning experience that we can take away from today to see how we can improve that and have centralised points of contact for schools as they work their way through.

In terms of the way we are organised in the planning and building division, we have our forward planning which looks ahead to the demographic needs and the enrolment trends and where our new school requirements are. We have site acquisitions that follow through on those announcements. We have our architectural planning areas that work through projects going into architectural planning and our rapid team is part of that as well, and ultimately, into construction as well. We can look at that and see if there is a learning experience for us.

The announcement of the 42 schools triggered quite a lot of public comment, comment from Members - I am sure the committee has heard it as well - and concerns from other schools as to how that might impact on them. We see this as part of normal business. These 42 schools will be part of the pipeline of projects to be delivered as part of the school building programme along with the projects that we have listed on our website. That sets out the current status of those.

A new element which has been learned from other schools is that we want to set out a four-year horizon of our new school requirements. In our previous announcement of new schools when we were announcing the school building programme in 2015, we announced the new schools that would be needed in 2017 and 2018 as well. That was giving a two-year lead-in period for the delivery of those projects. What we have done in the most recent announcement is set out the list of school requirements over a four-year horizon. That gives us better capacity to put in place the solutions, both accommodation and site, to deliver the accommodation for those schools when it is needed and avoid as much as possible the need for prefab solutions. That gives us a better lead-in period.

While the Gaelscoil in Knocklyon has a long history regarding prefabs, keeping it at a higher level regarding prefabs generally, it has to be recognised that the Department has put 5,000 extra teachers into the school system over the past two years and that has triggered accommodation requirements. In some cases that can be dealt with within the individual accommodation of the school, but in other cases it triggers an accommodation need. In those cases where those schools do their enrolment, and many schools do their enrolment in the February-March period of each year and new teachers start in September, even with the best will in the world that needs an interim accommodation solution while permanent accommodation is being put in place.

We have put a huge concentrated effort into dealing with the prefab issue. To a large extent, it is also a legacy of the past when there would have been historic underinvestment. We deal with that in a number of ways. In 2008, for example, we had approximately 2,000 classrooms in rented prefab accommodation. At the end of 2017, we had approximately 1,300. We are at a much lower level. Our spend on rented prefab accommodation was €14.5 million in 2017. It would have been a multiple of that figure in 2008.

As for what we have done, we have put in place the additional accommodation scheme which is a devolved scheme. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan mentioned devolved projects. It is a hugely successful scheme in delivering permanent solutions to schools for additional classroom accommodation, and that has helped to reduce the need for prefab requirements. Since 2010, more than 1,900 projects have been delivered under that scheme catering for, as I stated in my submission, 60,000 school places. That has been hugely successful and has helped reduce our reliance on prefabs. As part of further reducing our reliance on them, when we have new applications under that scheme, we look to see how we can replace prefabs as well as part of those applications. It is making further inroads into the prefab replacement, which is something to which we are committed. That gives a broad sense of where we are in terms of funding and in terms of approach to projects.

In terms of delivery mechanisms, a valid point was raised about the capacity of, say, school principals to manage the delivery of projects and how that is managed. Part of the learning experience for us is to see how best that can be achieved because we have various delivery mechanisms. One of those delivery mechanisms is the rapid build programme. This involves the design and building of schools with active project management, and it delivers ten new schools every year. I provided the committee, as part of the written submission, with a list of the 218 new schools that were built over the past eight years which shows the real active delivery of projects. In terms of the delivery mechanisms that were used in those 218 projects, 97 of them would have been the traditional approach of schools and a design team, 75 of them of them would have been built under the rapid build programme, 22 of them would have been completed under the public private partnership programme, and 24 of them would have been done on a devolved based, either via the education and training board, the Office of Public Works, the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, or the local authority. We have a wide variety of delivery mechanisms in place to ensure delivery.

Part of the learning experience for us is that the likes of the rapid build programme is particularly suitable for new school projects on greenfield sites. That will be our main method for getting new schools delivered, whether ones already on the existing programme or schools such as Ballinteer, as we have said to Ballinteer recently. No doubt it will probably be the method used in the Gaelscoil in Knocklyon as well because it provides a mechanism for getting a project delivered. Ms O'Neill can speak about the timeline and what is involved in the rapid build programme, assuming a site is there and planning permission has a particularly smooth run. Our written submission tried to give the committee an idea that there is a lot happening. We would love for the committee to come down to Tullamore to get a sense of what we are doing. Much work has been done on planning and delivery - many projects are being delivered - and we want to reassure the committee that the projects on the school building programme are being delivered, will be delivered and are capable of being delivered as part of the national development plan. Our focus on the 42 new schools relates to our being given a better lead-in period to enable the accommodation solutions in a more structured manner.

I will ask Ms O'Neill to discuss the rapid build programme and Mr. Power about the geo-

graphic information system, GIS, and then I can come back on specific questions, including the three schools.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We want answers. We were given a spiel there but we want answers.

Chairman: We will allow Ms O'Neill and Mr. Power to come in and if we do not get specific answers, we will come back again.

Ms Helen O'Neill: The rapid build programme was introduced in 2008 to deal with the need for schools to be constructed in a very short time in order to address a demographic need at the time. It is a project for the delivery of new schools when new schools are required in a short timeframe. This arises, for instance, where a new school has been established in temporary accommodation and there is a delay in the identification and procurement of a permanent site for the permanent home for that school, and the school is rapidly outgrowing its temporary accommodation. Once the new site is identified and the procurement process has commenced, the project progresses as part of the rapid programme to ensure that the permanent accommodation is available in the shortest possible time, thus allowing the school to move from its temporary home and avoid the need for additional temporary accommodation. The ideal scenario is where the site is identified and the procurement process commenced when the need for a new school is identified, thus allowing the accommodation to be in place when the new school is established and the school can move immediately into its new home. Because of the new school announcement, we are looking at methods by which we can address some of the schools on that list in that time frame.

The timeframe for a rapid project, where there is a smooth site acquisition process and a smooth planning process, can take anything from two to three years, but is dependent on that. Planning permissions are difficult for schools, as we are all aware. That can add up to a year to the planning process, if it has to go to An Bord Pleanála, if there are requests for information and so on. Under the rapid programme, there is a project manager with an internal technical team and there is an internal administrative team. They work closely together and with the local authorities to try to ensure a smooth planning process so that no problems arise in the delivery of the school. It does not always work because external influences always come into play. One major issue that arises is that of traffic around schools.

Nevertheless, a project can progress through the system by the traditional method if it is not impeded by issues related to sites and planning in about four to six years. We have a system in place called the adapt system, which has 20 projects which are being project managed to proceed through the traditional system. The intention is to roll out more adapt systems in future.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: To summarise what Ms O'Neill has said, the design and build programme is very much about project management which is one of the key themes which emerged from the discussion here. That has delivered solutions quickly for the Department. Obviously, it requires the site to be in place and ideally that there is a smooth delivery through the planning permission process. The adapt programme is a separate programme which uses project managers on traditional projects. We have had successful projects working through our planning process to tender in that and we will continue to use. For projects which are still on the Department's building programme that have to work their way into planning, we will see if there are means by which the rapid build programme or the adapt programme can be used to move those projects forward as quickly as possible.

Before Mr. Power speaks about the GIS, I will deal with some of the issues raised on particular schools today. I am conscious that I am coming here having been assistant secretary for six months and I might not necessarily know all background detail. Looking at Whitecross in Julianstown as a project to see what can be learned from it, the design team was appointed in March 2011. It is a 16-classroom school project, which was envisaged as a phased construction. That meant that the school would continue to operate and there would be a small decant from the existing building as the project was being worked through rather than a full decant off site. That is how the project started and how it got planning permission, which was granted in the first quarter of 2014.

Separately, options were presented for a full decant of the school from the site. Various options were examined and ultimately the school bought some land adjoining the school site which enabled a decant. The temporary accommodation needed for that required planning permission and that permission was not received until summer 2016. The change in the overall project, the time involved in getting the site and securing the planning permission had an impact on the project. It has now completed design.

On 16 March we received a revised version of that design with the cost plan. Costs were mentioned earlier but I do not want to get into that because of the commercial sensitivities in a project that has not yet been tendered. We expect that we will respond to the school on the design within the next couple of weeks and that the project, which has been given a letter by the Department on its progression, will be through the tendering process during 2018 with the intention of being on site in the first quarter of 2019. If the design team thinks it can do better than this and be on site in the fourth quarter of 2018, so much the better.

I am not saying the Department is blameless in this. I do not doubt there were issues that could have been turned around more quickly by the Department but I am looking at the project in hindsight to see what can be learned and how we can move forward. This is a traditionally managed project. There is a question of would the use of a project manager, such as we have in the adapt programme, have been beneficial in driving a project such as this one forward.

St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin has been mired for two reasons. One relates to the identification and acquisition of a site and the other was the particular planning issues. As an example of a project, therefore, we probably could not have identified a better one.

Chairman: Hear, hear.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Yes, but I would not necessarily regard that as indicative. If we look across the approximately 340 projects on the building programme or all the projects that are completed by the Department in a reasonable timeline, I would not necessarily believe it would be the same experience.

In terms of where this project is at now, the site for this particular school has been determined. The Chief State Solicitor's office is working with the legal representatives of the land-owners with a view to concluding the conveyancing. I am not in a position to get into the detail on that given that there is a legal process in train but it took until 2013 to get that site issue fully resolved. The final legalities are being worked through but notwithstanding that, we appointed a design team in April 2014 to get this project delivered. It has gone through the planning permission process, which was not a simple one. It probably took the best part of a year longer than we would have wished. Planning permission has been received. The designs have been done up and it is one of the approximately 50 projects on which we have given individualised

letters to provide clarity and the pathway forward to tender and construction. The latest design was received in the Department on 10 April and we envisage a response from the Department before the end of April in terms of any comments it might make on that. After this long journey, and we acknowledge it has been a difficult journey, it now has a very clear pathway forward in terms of tender and construction.

On the comments made about quarter 3 in 2019, if the design team is able to provide an improved timeline on that, that is certainly something the Department will examine.

Regarding Ballinteer, even though I used to live in Ballinteer many years ago, I will ask Mr. Power to give the update on that.

Mr. Brian Power: On the Ballinteer project, as has been outlined previously, the school opened in September 2012 in the grounds of St. Tiernan's community school on what is a 13-acre site in that area owned by the Department. It is a very valuable site in an area where it is difficult to get any other sites and our objective was to maximise both the site and for the school itself. Outline planning permission was applied for to the local authority in 2012. It was refused. We went to An Bord Pleanála which upheld the refusal. We went back to the county council with a new outline planning permission application and again the issue was about access onto that site from the roads around Ballinteer. It was deemed by the county council not to be safe and to impede traffic so again it was fully refused. We went back to An Bord Pleanála for the second time and it pointed out to us that what it would welcome in this particular case would be co-operation between the local authority and the Department in any future planning application to maximise the possibility of the success of the application and to ensure a co-ordinated approach overall on access to this education broad campus.

At that point a site selection report was undertaken by our engineers who came up with 18 possible routes into the site. In fairness, four of those routes were on foot but 14 were possible for some vehicular access onto the site. Again, we went back to the county council with that and it picked out one preferred site. The county council had particular concerns about the site. There are protected structures on the site. There is a Victorian walled garden and other structures also. Unfortunately, the preferred council access for the site was alongside the walled garden and we had to have regard to that, but it also fell into the ownership of two third-party outside owners.

We went back to the council with new plans for it to examine and it asked us at that point, and this is now 2015-16, to return with a full report from a conservation architect to examine the impact of the route on the protected structures on the site. At that point, we engaged a consultant architect. We drew up the report and went back to the council with new plans. We also engaged with the third parties and it emerged at that point that one of them had proposals on which, unfortunately, we could not reach agreement. It is a property owner, a new developer, and he had particular reasons for looking at the site in a particular way, which would impact on the school. From our point of view, the school was the priority but we had no access into the site. On foot of the fact that we could not find agreement with that third party and we found full agreement with the other third party, the project has been given to the rapids team. They are working with their consultants on examining the means of access and egress on the site with a view, as I understand it, to going back to the council with a full planning permission application. Arrangements have been made with the council for it to go into pre-planning on that basis.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Power. I believe Mr. Power will deal with the geographical information system, GIS.

Mr. Brian Power: I can do that now if that suits.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I will pick up on any remaining issues or queries from individual Deputies.

Mr. Brian Power: From the point of view of the GIS, the Deputy asked about the sort of system that is used. There is a system called ArcGIS, which is an off-the-shelf system in the first instance but has been built to accommodate the needs of the school planning system. It takes all the data we have to use and puts that into a spatial context in terms of a map of Ireland overall, which is broken up into 314 individual school planning areas. One of the reasons behind this is that we know what the national peaks are in terms of school enrolments. We know that primary enrolment overall comes to a peak in the current year and, nationally, should begin to fall back at that point whereas post-primary enrolments will continue to grow until about 2025. Unfortunately, that growth is not even across the country so it means we have to look at specific areas. That is the reason we break up the entire country into 314 school planning areas. They are largely post-primary feeder areas. Primary schools largely feed into post-primary centres and they could be single or multiple centres. We look at those as a cluster and that is what forms the very basis of each school planning area overall. The GIS allows us to take all the data from the enrolments from the primary and post-primary pupil databases, Ordnance Survey, the census and child benefit data for the nought to four age group because they are not currently in our school system. These data are then attributed across the 314 areas, which allows us to determine potential growth in each area. We then project forward using enrolment figures.

The position is fairly stable because once we have figures on enrolments, the number of children aged four years and under and the number of children in school at each class, it is possible to make a reasonably accurate projection for each year. We then calibrate for intake patterns, by which I mean that while each school planning area will theoretically have a 100% intake from its area at primary and post-primary level, we know that, for a range of reasons, children attend either the nearest school, the school that suits parents or a school outside the school planning area. Some people live on the borders of school planning areas and will, therefore, fall into other areas. We identify whether there is a significant additional intake above 100% in each area or whether the intake falls below 100%. Our projections are made on the basis of an average of three years of the intake pattern because intake patterns are normally fairly stable. Again, we have to calibrate the system to take account of this.

The most recent national exercises did not include housing data. In 2013, new housing provision was at a low of 8,300 units. It is now increasing again and reached 19,200 units in 2017. There is a substantial impact in areas where new housing is being built through the local authorities or another system. This can have a significant impact on school planning in a particular school planning area.

We collect all the data from the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, which drives much of the major housing development. New developments under the LIHAF process pass straight to An Bord Pleanála. We have also interact on an ongoing basis with local authorities on their local action plans, LAPs. As these project forward, the LAPs are not sufficiently strong to allow us to predict enrolments for schools. Some months ago, we sought from all local authorities updated information to clarify how many houses had been provided in the previous 18 months or were due to be delivered for the coming 18 months. We had to revert to some local authorities on the matter. We indicated that new developments of 100 units or more would be significant because 100 houses generate in the region of 1.2 primary classrooms based on house occupancy, average number of children per household and so forth. We make calcula-

tions on that basis. Given that 100 houses produces approximately one primary classroom, it was a reasonable number to choose. Unfortunately, we only received returns indicating developments of 100 or more units from some areas and we had to revert to the local authorities on the matter. If one has a school planning area in which there are several housing developments of 50 or 60 units each, this could be significant. Some local authorities returned figures on such developments. Others did not do so and we clarified the matter for them.

One of the issues we must be aware of in terms of new housing is internal migration. Obviously, people move from A to B within the country. New housing in some areas will have a take-up from within the area on the part of people who are renting. This means they will not necessarily generate new school places, whereas in other areas, particularly those in which major developments take place, there tends to be a large influx from a broad area outside the area and we must take account of this. While this process is not exact, this time, based on all the new developments, we have brought the system up to date by introducing these extra data which we did not use previously. From the point of view of how we finally access this, we also consider existing and planned school capacity. This is a major part of the work we are required to do in this area.

Some schools will have capacity and classrooms available and some schools will have planned capacity under our six-year programme. The three schools in question probably have planned capacity in addition to current capacity. We plan for this to meet future needs. We cannot replicate but it will be delivered because it is in the pipeline, notwithstanding delays. We factor in this extra new capacity which will also be delivered.

As a result of all of this, we arrive at a new figure for net demand for each of the 314 school planning areas. With primary school enrolments set to decline from 2018 onwards, we found that there will be either a fully stable or declining population in up to 75% of primary school planning areas, whereas the shoe is very much on the other foot in respect of post-primary schools. In some areas, up to 70% of school planning areas at post-primary level have some degree of increase. While this increase will be minor in some cases, in others it will be significant.

We use existing capacity, extended capacity, major projects or new schools to address these needs depending on the size and scale involved and the extent and duration of the demand. In some cases, demand will peak briefly before rapidly declining. We then address the issues of overall size in terms of the number and scale of schools, whether greater diversity is required in some areas and language in terms of English or Irish-medium schools. All of these factors enter the equation.

In terms of size, we have to address the issues of the need for sufficient scale and the best educational environment for the children in question, including with regard to choice of subjects and specialist facilities, particularly at post-primary level. Normally, we would not create small post-primary schools because they must be of a scale that gives students a broad choice of subjects and enables the provision of sufficient specialist facilities. At primary level, we normally provide schools that approximate in size to one standard each. As the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level is 26:1, the standard will be a class of 26 pupils, moving up from junior infants up to sixth class over eight years. Depending on size, we will provide an eight, 16 or 24-classroom school. In some cases, we will even provide schools with 32 classrooms. These schools are standard size but there are schools around the country that are non-standard size because they fit the population of the relevant area.

In post-primary schools, the normal standard size to give the best spread of opportunity for

those attending a school that can accommodate 1,000 pupils. However, schools with between 500 and 800 pupils are not uncommon. The size will depend on demand. Post-primary schools are generally not provided where the scale is under 500, although there are some exceptions. When the peak is below this level, we try to extend the capacity of existing schools or provide what we describe as a regional solution, of which there are a number in the announcement of 42 schools. That is where two contiguous school planning areas both have a need that is below that threshold but by putting the two together we can come up with a regional solution. Outside urban areas regional solutions are only practical for post-primary schools in most cases because they mean longer travelling distances, whereas in urban areas sometimes we can have one of those solutions for primary schools where areas are quite close to each other. Again, it all depends on where we perceive the growth to be. We use child benefit data for children up to four years of age to see exactly where the growth is in the school planning area. I take the point made by the Deputy earlier about some of the school planning areas being very big in size. That is true. It generally reflects the spread of the population.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I accept that. Drogheda is a reasonable school planning area. However, the Department announced a school for Drogheda-Laytown. Can the Department say where that school will be?

Mr. Brian Power: We cannot at this point. It is a post-primary school. It is based on the growth around the south of Drogheda area and very much in the north of the Laytown area. In fact, it is a contiguous area.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is the Department considering Duleek?

Mr. Brian Power: We have to go through the site acquisition process first.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I discussed this issue with the witness last year, so I am welcoming it.

Mr. Brian Power: We would not rule out any areas.

To conclude, we are looking at a four-year horizon here. This is new because previously we generally announced two years in advance. The four-year horizon facilitates greater and earlier planning for new sites and permanent buildings so we will have less temporary accommodation and fewer of the issues we have discussed here today. However, there is an absolute need for ongoing review here. This is because, first, we have a four-year horizon overall which in school planning terms is quite long because things change, populations change and populations move and, second, we have now brought in housing data and we know that major new housing developments are being approved almost weekly. Some of the questions raised on some of the areas may mean that we have to revisit those and see how best to provide. We would have to revisit areas in between the major exercises because this situation, which did not happen over the past eight to ten-year period, is happening very quickly as well. We have a commitment to continue looking at that.

The next step on this will be the patronage process. When we move into that process for the 2019 schools, that is, the schools to be established and to open in 2019, we will have to run the patronage process for the post-primary schools first and then for the primary schools. We expect to be doing that over the coming months. On that front, and to conclude on the process, there is a new online process for patronage and for parental preferences to be expressed. We were not entirely happy, and the new schools establishment group also expressed its unhappiness, with

the shortcomings of the old system, which was in the hands of patrons only and, unfortunately, patrons had a very hard job as well trying to collect individual patron preferences from parents on the street. From our point of view we wish to put the system online and to give parents more information. We want to provide them with comparative information on the patron groups because the differences are not well understood at present. It will enable parents to make a more informed choice and it should be easier for parents to go online. Hopefully, we will make the system more efficient from the Department's point of view also because we will be able to make the system produce outcomes from it which can feed into our overall deliberations.

Before I leave the subject of the GIS and new schools, perhaps I should address Ashbourne and south Kildare.

Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Brian Power: There were specific questions on that. Our net requirement from that system, having applied it across the board in Ashbourne, was that there was no need for a new school in that area. Part of the reason is that there is substantial capacity in some existing schools.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is the witness aware that one of the principals there had serious concerns, which were relayed to another official in the Department, about next September?

Mr. Brian Power: Yes, it has come through from the other side of the Department and we are in contact with them. We know that the local principals have met. We understand there is a particular surge in the number of junior infants which has not shown up on the system. It appears to have happened since September last year. We are taking that into account and we are looking at the data that has come through from the principals. We are checking it out at present because there can be some overlap in the data.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is the witness saying the Department could possibly revise this to include Ashbourne if necessary?

Mr. Brian Power: If it is necessary we can. What we are saying is that on the basis of-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This relates to what the witness mentioned about housing. Is the system missing housing?

Mr. Brian Power: No.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is the witness confident of that?

Mr. Brian Power: Yes. We went back to the county council-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: A huge amount of housing has been built in Ashbourne in the last few years, including family homes and starter homes. It is the same in Dunshaughlin.

Mr. Brian Power: Absolutely.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There is nothing in LIHAF. LIHAF was not applicable in those areas.

Mr. Brian Power: Yes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is the witness confident that the system would have picked up all

of that?

Mr. Brian Power: Yes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Incidentally, it is not just the junior infants. I have a general concern as well. I am sorry for hogging the meeting.

Chairman: That is fine.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: People who are moving into a four-bedroom detached house are likely to have children who are already at school so they want them to get into fourth class or first year, for example. That appears to be a major problem in various towns such as Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin at present.

Mr. Brian Power: Yes. At local level there have been inputs both from the schools and from Tusla, which has come back to us. We are looking at all the figures at present. We are trying to disaggregate the figures that have come from the schools because in the enrolment process for the next year people may apply to more than one school. We have to try to take out the duplicates to find out exactly what is happening and why there is such a surge both on the junior infant side and, we are being told, up along the classes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The witness has raised another point. I never dealt with Tusla or that side of education until last year in Ashbourne. I never had cause to do so, but now I have. How often does the Department meet Tusla? I worry that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla are on another side with information about children who are not able to get into school. In some areas, and I will not name them, it tends to be children whose parents' first language would not be English. There are significant information disadvantages in many cases. How often does the Department meet with Tusla and the education welfare officers?

Mr. Brian Power: The education welfare officer would come to our Department and raise the availability of school places. That happens when it needs to happen if there is a real concern. The education welfare officer in particular circumstances will place children who cannot get a place in a school. That is normal. However, where there is a significant number the officer will come to us.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Okay.

Chairman: Mr. Power said he would refer to south Kildare.

Mr. Brian Power: Yes. We looked at all of south Kildare. The principal area where there is pressure in Kildare at present is the Kildare town school planning area. We see an increase in excess of 300 over time there. That would not in itself normally trigger a new school. Part of the picture is the fact that we are supplying new accommodation and extra places across a whole range of other schools, including St. Paul's on the Monasterevin site. The St. Paul's places are included in that, which is an indication that we expect to see them delivered. Also, in Athy, Kilcullen and at Newbridge there are extra places. Between all of them, I think we are looking at 1,700 extra post-primary school places, which is quite large. The only part of south Kildare where the numbers are coming in and are not accounted for in that way would be in the Kildare town area. Because of the extent of that, what we will examine at present is the feasibility of how existing schools could be expanded with major projects. However, we will keep it under review. With new housing and various things happening so quickly in those areas, if that happens and if it impacts very significantly before anything else happens, then we would

have to look at that again.

Chairman: On that point, the GIS system is slightly skewed, particularly in respect of the Newbridge area, because of the fact that a private school is included. We cannot say there is an element of choice if a school place costs €8,000 a year for a child to go there. I definitely think that has a negative impact on the figures that are being used. We cannot say those places are open for any individual who needs to go to school.

Mr. Brian Power: Absolutely.

Chairman: I absolutely believe that there is more of a crisis in Newbridge than Mr. Power is indicating. Over the last two or three years, parents have been approaching me on a regular basis who cannot get their children into schools. I accept that it is specific schools that they are trying to get their children into. However, parents are also concerned about the element of choice of education. While I accept that a school has to be established first and then the patronage follows, we cannot ignore the fact that there are two very successful new Educate Together primary schools in Newbridge and Kildare. There is obviously a very strong school community around them and those parents want an element of choice. I certainly believe the numbers are sufficient to merit a new secondary school. I was very disappointed that although it was on the list in 2015, it is not there now.

I raised the GIS earlier in respect of special education provision. That is being left out and is not being factored in enough in respect of our whole secondary school provision.

Mr. Brian Power: I wish to reassure the Chair on the private school issue. It is an issue we tackled ourselves again this year in terms of trying to address the system and the glitches that can come. We are very much aware of the skewing effect that a private school can have on an area. We have introduced a new element into the system whereby we factor out the places in private schools that are not taken up by local students from within the school planning area. The Chairman is right that this will have an impact on areas like Newbridge. It also has an enormous impact in some of the south Dublin school planning areas where almost all the schools are private. We have now factored that in for the first time. I am glad to say that hopefully we should make it more accurate overall.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Power for that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne took the Chair.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I am happy to work through some of the individual issues the Deputies and Senators have raised. I will take them in the sequence in which they were raised. Senator Ruane mentioned instances where the Department says we have been in regular contact with schools yet this is not the experience of some of the individual schools. From the Department's perspective, we are a single, central unit dealing with 4,000 schools. There are some constraints on our capacity to respond to each and every query from every school. We were anxious to update our website and streamline the information on it as a means of giving a clearer and more transparent picture for schools in terms of the current status of all their projects. That is set out and listed now on our website in a single, clear list which will be updated at the end of every month.

The Senator also raised issues about how we can improve communication. That is one of the learning experiences we will take away from today to see, in addition to what we have done in terms of the website, if there is anything else we can do to help improve communications.

That is something we will look at. She also raised issues about site acquisitions and compulsory purchase of sites. Compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, are done by local authorities. It has been done in a couple of cases in respect of schools and the local authorities have done it for us. It is not a simple or quick process. It takes time. Our experience is that it would be an option of last resort in terms of getting a site where there might be an unwilling vendor. Our experience is that if there is a willing vendor, we can work solutions around site issues in a speedier way rather than having to go down the CPO route.

Deputy Thomas Byrne raised various questions. Some of them were about individual schools in Meath. If the Deputy agrees, we might come back to him individually on those questions. I think there is in the order of 20 or 21 schools in Meath on the school building programme. We have set out on our website the current status of all those projects-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne): If I may take the liberty as Acting Chairman to interrupt the witness, it has been pointed out to me and it is a reasonable criticism that despite what Mr. Loftus said, it is not easier to look at what is on the website. Nobody knows what stage 1 or stage 2b is. Nobody knows what these terms mean. Dáil Deputies might possibly know but I would say a lot of them do not. Deputy Lahart mentioned that the capital programme seems to have been completely deleted from the website. There was a progress list on the Department's website which was updated on a monthly basis and was very useful. It listed projects due to commence in 2013, 2014, 2015 and so on. That was the easiest way of looking at it because people would know when a project was due to be built and could actually see what the progress was. There was a lot more detail in those lists than there is in the current list. The list is now significantly lacking in detail, in my estimation.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Our experience based on feedback from schools generally and from queries led to an effort by the Department to bring them together into a single list in order of county so that people could get a clear picture on a county-by-county basis of the current status of all large single projects. In terms of the terminology, at the end of the list it very clearly sets out that stage 1 is very much about the preliminary design; stage 2 is about the more developed sketch and detailed design; stage 3 is about tender action, evaluation and award; and stage 4 is about construction.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I acknowledge what Mr. Loftus has said in respect of Whitecross national school in terms of the Department's plan for the start of construction. It has been at stage 2 for the best part of ten years or more so that does not really give parents any information. There was some level of detail in a previous list that is now absent.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin resumed the Chair.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: There were about 50-odd projects that we dealt with nearly on an individual basis, in a sense. We could give them more information than we can readily give in a website update and that information set out a clear pathway for all those projects in terms of progressing through pre-qualification, tender and through to construction. Whitecross would be one of those projects along with St. Paul's in Monasterevin. They would have been given that individualised letter that would set out the pathway for that.

The list that we put up on the website is part of our ongoing efforts to improve information. Clearly there are issues in terms of improving communication generally for schools and for public representatives and that is what we will look at to see further improvements. We think it is useful to have in a single list all of the projects on a county-by-county basis setting out their

current status and we will be looking to progress them as quickly as we can. On the budget side of things, I have already set out in terms of the 42 projects the fact that we are progressing the school building programme and the scale of the national development plan. We monitor the budget closely. If, in any given year, we think there are pressure points and that additional funding will be required, we will engage with the Department of Public Expenditure on it. It is something to which we pay close attention.

Deputy Byrne mentioned that 575 projects are not going ahead. Those are applications for large-scale projects that are not yet on the capital programme.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Are those projects in addition to the 341 mentioned?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: They are in addition to the 341.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Holy God.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: There are 575 applications for major, large-scale projects. Those projects are largely refurbishment projects or have a major refurbishment element. Over recent years the Department's focus has been on demographics, so we are very conscious, in terms of the national development plan, of providing the necessary funding of €8.4 billion to give us the capacity to increase our focus on refurbishment. We have set that out clearly as part of the national development plan.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The total is 341 plus 575 plus 42 is 958.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: That gives-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There are 958, so what we have been saying until now is under-selling the problem. I have looked at the Estimates for 2008 to 2009. The witness has said that there was €110 million for schools. I am looking at the national schools Estimate for 2009, which was €422 million.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Will the witness answer some of the questions from other members?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am in the hands of the Chair.

Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: To clarify, the spend of €130 million on large-scale projects in 2010 was the element that was spent on large-scale projects at that point in time, as distinct from the full budget.

Chairman: Will the witness refer to Deputy Jan O'Sullivan's question?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It was a specific question, and if the witness does not have the answer it is fine. I asked whether there was any progress on finding a site for the Educate Together post-primary school in Limerick city east. It is opening in September, but it is without a site.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: We will come back to the Deputy with an answer.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: If the answer is not available today, that is fine, but I want to know one way or the other.

Ms Helen O'Neill: The school is going to open in temporary start-up accommodation in Castletroy. The site is being sourced by the Department in co-operation with Educate Together, the patron body. The Department is also working with Limerick County Council under the memo of understanding, MOU, towards the acquisition of a permanent site. This process is ongoing since the start of 2016. Two potential sites have been shortlisted, but there are issues with both. The issues are being worked through and the negotiation process is still ongoing on the preferred site. Every effort is being made to expedite this matter.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the witness.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Deputy O'Sullivan spoke about communications and how we can learn from the experiences of the three schools. Looking at the delivery of projects, we see the rapid build programme as the method to use to deliver projects quickly. Project management is a part of that. We also envisage using the Adapt programme, which is project-managed with traditional projects. That gives additional support to schools in terms of getting projects delivered. Those are two key methods which will help to drive forward school building projects.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The schools that presented to us have all, for one reason or another, experienced delay. Those schools should be focused on in terms of better communication methods, as opposed to the projects progressing at a normal pace.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: That is something we can look at as part of how we improve communication generally. There are 4,000 schools that can knock on our door. We are talking here about large-scale projects, but there can be devolved projects and other issues as well. We have to consider what is workable and manageable. We view the website as an important avenue for keeping schools updated on the current status of their projects.

The issue of the site for the Monasterevin school was mentioned. The Deputy asked about the procurement of a site, why it took so long and how that issue could have been managed better. In general we procure about one third of our sites from other State bodies, mostly the local authorities. Wherever we need sites for schools, we generally look at that avenue as a first port of call. There are standard methods for proceeding in that way. We engage closely with local authorities, such as the Fingal area, which help us to acquire sites. We have learned that it is important to identify, acquire and procure the site. That is the key first step in terms of the delivery of new school projects and is something we are working on.

Deputy O'Sullivan asked about the level of information we can give about the site acquisition process. There are particular sensitivities when dealing with developers. Negotiations are going on and we have to be careful that we do not compromise the negotiation process by putting too much information into the public domain.

The Deputy also asked about the devolved delivery of projects. Within the 218 new schools delivered, a cohort of schools were delivered on a devolved basis, as I set out earlier. In addition, the permanent accommodation scheme, which has delivered in excess of 1,900 projects and 60,000 school places over the past eight years is one of the key methods we have used to deliver projects on a devolved basis. The devolved basis method enabled the schools to go ahead and deliver the projects. Clear parameters and arrangements for achieving that were set out. Where the projects to be delivered on a devolved basis are significant projects worth €1 million or more, we deliver them through the support of other agencies, such as an education and training board. In terms of a wider learning experience, I believe education and training boards are a useful mechanism to help support schools generally, both ETB schools and non-ETB schools,

in terms of managing the delivery of projects. The Education and Training Boards Act has enabling legislation to facilitate that.

Deputy Funchion mentioned health and safety issues in temporary accommodation and audits that have been carried out. From the Department's perspective, health and safety legislation makes it clear that that is an issue that is managed at local school level. The Department worked with the Health and Safety Authority and the education centres in developing procedures and manuals on managing health and safety in schools, and those are available to assist schools.

Deputy Lahart mentioned the Gaelscoil in Knocklyon, and the difficulty with communication, including tweeting. There were also issues about having to resort to freedom of information, FOI, requests, parliamentary questions and Topical Issue debates to get information. I am not sure that I can answer every aspect of his question. I am looking at it now in terms of where we stand and the pathway forward. Part of the learning experience for us is how we can improve communication for schools generally, including the Gaelscoil in Knocklyon. In terms of that project, locating a site has been a particular issue. The school was in prefabs for 22 years, which reflects the fact that there has been a legacy of underinvestment in public infrastructure generally for decades. However, the site issue is moving forward, which will provide a pathway for delivering that project which is part of our school building programme. As a new school project, one of the first areas we would look at in terms of delivering the project would be as part of our rapid design and build programme.

Deputy John Lahart: Can I ask a supplementary question?

Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Deputy Lahart also asked about political input to school building projects. Given that I have only been managing the unit for six months, looking across the list of projects, demographics is the driver in getting projects delivered. They stand on their own merits. The geographic information system, GIS, identifies the new schools that are needed. Those data set out where they are at. I do not see the Deputy's query being a particular issue.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: May I ask for clarity on a point?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The suggestion has been made by the deputy principal of Ballinteer Educate Together school that a local Deputy announced on Twitter that the school was to move to another school site. Will Mr. Loftus comment on that?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I was not in the unit at the time so I would not be able to answer that question.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Would it be the Department's practice to notify an individual Deputy, in an official sense, if he or she is not a Minister?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: No. From the official side we set out the school building programme and we work towards that. During my tenure in this post I want to try to improve the level of communication information to schools and for committee members and public representatives generally on a fair, open and transparent basis. It will be fair to everybody if this is set out clearly. Last week's announcement of bringing together all the lists into a single list that sets out the status of all projects is an important first step in that regard.

Deputy John Lahart: I am a bit lost. When the witness speaks of the national development plan he speaks of 2040.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Yes, that would be part of the Project Ireland 2040 plan. The Project Ireland 2040 plan covers the period up to 2040, and the national development plan sets out the capital funding to deliver on Project Ireland 2040 for the period 2018 to 2027.

Deputy John Lahart: There are 341 schools on the list.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Yes.

Deputy John Lahart: One of these schools is the Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna in Knocklyon. Were the 40 projects that were announced last week part of the original 341 schools? Was it 371 schools at that stage?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I will explain for the Deputy. Some 340 projects on the school building programme were announced as part of the school building programme back in November 2015. In tandem with that, the new schools to be delivered for September 2017 and September 2018 were announced. At this time it is totally natural for planning to announce the new schools required and to be delivered for September 2019 to September 2022, inclusive. The new experience here, as part of the learning experience we have brought to this process, is that rather than announcing new school requirements just two years in advance, we are now announcing them four years in advance. It is through the GIS system that we are able to do this and we achieve a better lead-in period for planning and delivery of those new school projects.

Deputy John Lahart: Is the Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna on the list of 40 schools?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: To clarify, the list of 42 projects are new schools that are required which are not yet in existence. We require new schools in those areas between now and 2022. Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna and other schools on the school building programme are schools that are already in existence, they are on our schools building programme to be delivered and they will be delivered as part of that. To give a sense of the scale of the school building programme currently, during 2018 we have some 85 large-scale school building projects that are either at construction or are going to construction in 2018. In addition, there are 29 very significant devolved projects under the additional accommodation scheme, which are costing more than €1 million each. This gives the Deputy an idea of the scale of what is happening. Under the additional accommodation scheme generally, there are 170 projects at construction in 2018. There are a huge number of projects at construction stage. As with any large-scale capital programme, there is a pipeline of projects that are at various stages, advanced design, early design or at site acquisition stage. The 42 projects that were announced last week feed into that process and that pipeline.

Deputy John Lahart: Given that the site for Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna has been acquired, and this was confirmed on radio by the Department's press office-----

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I do not have the precise legalities on it but it has made significant progress in the acquisition process.

Deputy John Lahart: The press release said that the site was acquired.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Yes.

Deputy John Lahart: Has it been acquired?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I do not have the immediate details. There has been a huge amount of engagement with the local authority around that site and on working it through. As far as I know it has been acquired, but I will come back to the committee on that.

Deputy John Lahart: In the event that the site is acquired, is it then ready to go to stage 1?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: It is a key milestone in the delivery of the project.

Deputy John Lahart: I appreciate that.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: It then enables the process to work through to the initial sketching out of the project and the project brief. A decision point for the Department is around the best delivery mechanism for the project.

Deputy John Lahart: This is whether it is rapid build.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Yes, rapid build or otherwise.

Deputy John Lahart: Has Mr. Loftus indicated that it might be rapid build?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: In our experience, and all other things being equal, it has been our experience that the rapid build programme is the best delivery method for new projects on greenfield sites, unless there is a good reason or the site is not suitable for that.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Chairman. She has given me huge latitude.

Chairman: The Deputy will have just one more supplementary question. That is all.

Deputy John Lahart: In his experience will Mr. Loftus indicate a timeline from the moment of site acquisition? Notwithstanding any possible impediments that the Department cannot know about such as pipes or utilities in the ground, and if planning permission is okay, which should be the case because it is a relatively secure site from a planning application perspective and I could not anticipate any planning objections to the planning application, what would the normal timeline for this project be from turning the sod given that we are now at April 2018?

Mr. Hubert Loftus: It can depend on the delivery method. Earlier Ms O'Neill spoke about the rapid build programme and the timelines in relation to that. Obviously it can vary from project to project. The Deputy said that he would not envisage planning objections but they can arise.

Deputy John Lahart: Sure.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: It is our experience that in urban areas one can get planning objections and appeals to An Bord Pleanála in more than 20% of cases. If one assumes the planning process is smooth, then a best case scenario is a two-year period for delivery of the project but three years is probably more realistic.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank Mr. Loftus.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am sorry for delaying the departure of the officials who have travelled all the way from Tullamore but we are under pressure to get answers.

Chairman: I have one point, and I thank the witnesses for their frankness-----

Mr. Hubert Loftus: I believe my discussions covered a lot of the points raised. I am aware

that I have not covered all of them, such as Deputy Heydon's questions, but I have picked them up in my general commentary. I am aware that the Chairman had some particular questions also. I think I have covered a fair few of them already.

Chairman: To be fair it is never going to be an easy thing to come to the committee and satisfy all the different questions, and all the hopes and dreams that are represented by members for their constituents and all the children. This committee wants to ensure that every child has a very good educational experience within a modern classroom in a modern school. We accept that this is also the Department's aim.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Absolutely.

Chairman: We will certainly take up the invitation to visit the Department at Tullamore. Mr. Loftus said that if we looked at all of the bills, we would certainly not choose St. Paul's, which was among the worst-case scenarios with which the Department has had to deal. There were a lot of hiccoughs to get to this point. Hopefully, we are now making progress. Mr. Loftus says the design team will come back by the end of April. I want to push the Department as to when we will get the lease signed, given that the site has been under consideration for more than 15 years. Is there a possibility that the school will now enter the rapid build programme? The Department says that is the best situation for a greenfield site, which this will be. Bearing in mind what everybody has gone through to get to this point, putting it into the rapid scheme would be very helpful.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: The rapid build programme is a design and build one. It starts with a greenfield scenario where there is no design done. St. Paul's in Monasterevin already has a design and planning permission. All of the documentation is in place. The revised documentation was sent in to us a couple of weeks ago and we will be responding within a couple of weeks. We have set out a clear pathway and timeline for the delivery of the project through tender to construction. There is no advantage to changing course at this stage to a different project.

Ms Helen O'Neill: It could delay it.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: That would delay it and we have no interest in doing that.

Chairman: That is fair enough. I thank the witnesses. We may agree to disagree on aspects of school delivery. I hope this has been a valuable exercise for the witnesses also in terms of listening to the principals earlier and understanding the huge amount of work they have to do around the learning and informal learning environment to have a positive impact on students' lives. They have to deal with all of the red tape that seems to be making life more difficult all the time. We will revisit the matter and consider recommendations as a committee. I acknowledge that the Minister sets policy which the officials have to implement. We appreciate it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The witnesses get the money from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and we do not blame the officials for a lack of funding.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: We have to work within that but if we find there is a particular pressure point or year with certain issues, we engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in that regard. I hope that from the perspective of the committee and for the schools that listened, we have communicated some sense of the detailed work we do on forward and strategic planning and of the wide variety of delivery mechanisms we use to get school building projects done. It is to be hoped that when the members visit Tullamore, they will get an even better sense of that work. School building projects are large-scale projects. If they were simple,

straightforward and easy, they would be done quicker. There is a process to work through and it involves significant investment by the taxpayer. We are working to ensure that is done as quickly as possible. I hope people are reassured about the school building programme by the setting out of the status of their projects and by the fact that we are adopting a more strategic approach to the 42 schools we announced last week to give us a better lead-in period. We are coming from a point of historical underinvestment in education and other public infrastructure. Things like the national development plan make a significant contribution to playing catch-up to address that.

Chairman: It was certainly helpful and informative from our point of view. I put Mr. Loftus on notice that I will be in contact with him very soon about south Kildare.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Department will never get us out of Tullamore. That is the problem.

Chairman: I note to Deputy Byrne that we have to revert to private session for a few minutes.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: Deputy Byrne is due to meet me.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: If the officials want to reschedule, it is very late for them. I am free after this meeting.

Chairman: Go ahead. I will just go through something for the record in private session.

Mr. Hubert Loftus: While I am here in Dublin, it is an opportunity to meet the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We will do that at the location we agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 7.15 p.m. and adjourned at 7.25 p.m. until 3. 30 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 April 2018.