

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS COIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Dé Céadaoin, 24 Meán Fómhair 2014

Wednesday, 24 September 2014

The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy James Bannon,	Senator Jim D'Arcy,
Deputy Ray Butler,	Senator Mary Moran,
Deputy Brendan Griffin,	Senator Hildegarde Naughton,
Deputy Derek Keating,	Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell,
Deputy Charlie McConalogue,	Senator Averil Power.
Deputy Jonathan O'Brien,	

DEPUTY JOANNA TUFFY IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputies Michael Conaghan and Brendan Ryan. The meeting is being carried live on UPC channel 207 and Sky channel 574.

At the request of broadcasting and recording services, Members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile telephones are turned off completely or switched to aeroplane safe or flight mode, depending on the device.

In accordance with the standard procedures agreed by the Committee on Procedure and Privileges for the paperless committees, all documentation for the meeting has been circulated to Members in the document database.

I propose going into private session to deal with minutes and certain other matters.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.11 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.25 p.m.

Vote 26 - Update on Pre-Budget and Policy Issues: Minister for Education and Skills

Chairman: I welcome the newly appointed Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, her colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English and the departmental officials. I wish to draw to the attention of the Minister, the Minister of State and the officials to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee 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 asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statement submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. 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. Once again, I ask that everyone puts his or her mobile phone in aeroplane mode or switches it off completely. The proceedings are being broadcast today on both the UPC channel 207 and Sky channel 574.

The purpose of today's meeting is to conduct a mid-year review of the position regarding expenditure in the Department of Education and Skills for 2014, with a particular focus on performance and output related data and also to consider the Department's proposals for 2015. It is intended that this mid-year review will become an annual feature of the joint committee's ongoing scrutiny of expenditure. I welcome the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan and the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills and at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Damien English, and their officials on their first visit to the joint committee.

A timetable for today's meeting has been circulated which allows for a brief opening statement by the Minister to be followed by a discussion of each programme in the Estimate. The

timetable has been agreed. I now invite the Minister to make her opening statement.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): I thank the Chairman and members of the joint committee for extending the invitation to the Minister of State, Deputy English and me to discuss my Department's mid-year expenditure position for 2014, and the position for 2015. This is the first time both of us have had the opportunity to meet the committee. We look forward to fruitful and positive discussions on education and skills, which I know is of particular concern to each and every member present. I would also like to acknowledge the good work done by my predecessor, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, who appeared before the joint committee on many occasions.

I will as requested keep this opening statement short in order to allow more time for discussion. As the Chairman already stated, my Department has provided some briefing slides for committee members which, together with material provided by the committee secretariat, will hopefully assist today's discussions. I propose at this stage to expand only briefly on the slides provided, but I am of course happy to elaborate on any issues as they subsequently arise and to answer any questions..

The gross voted expenditure allocation for my Department for 2014 is €8.403 billion, made up of €7.85 billion in current expenditure and €546 million in capital expenditure. Added to this is €362 million in non-voted funding from the National Training Fund. The 2014 allocation took account of current expenditure savings and expenditure reductions of some €44 million, while at the same time seeking to protect front-line education services as much as possible. The pupil-teacher ratio in non-fee-charging schools at primary and post-primary levels was protected for the third year in a row, while the 2014-15 school year is expected to see approximately 1,400 additional teachers recruited to schools, providing positions for newly qualified and unemployed teachers. Two thirds of the additional teachers will be mainstream teachers, while one third will be resource teachers supporting children with special educational needs. In addition, the ceiling in the number of special needs assistant posts was increased by 390 posts to 10,965 posts, compared to the earlier ceiling of 10,575 posts.

The outputs to be achieved with the 2014 expenditure allocation were set out in the revised estimates volume for my Department. In addition to funding the salaries of over 96,000 public servants and pensions for 42,500 pensioners - I must admit I was surprised that the figure was so high - the allocation provided for further funding to progress a number of important educational initiatives. These include the literacy and numeracy strategy, the reform of the junior certificate and the continued roll-out of high-speed broadband to second level schools. In addition, proceeds from the national lottery licence transaction were used to provide seed funding to allow primary schools without book rental schemes to set up such schemes. The 2014 provision also continues to provide funding for training and reskilling, for persons in employment and for those seeking work. In order to help tackle youth unemployment, a minimum of 2,000 places were ring-fenced in a new round of the Momentum programme - which we launched this morning - for the under 25s who are out of work, while 5,000 places were scheduled for roll-out under the Springboard programme.

On the capital side, the allocation for 2014 provides mainly for ongoing delivery of the five year 2012-16 school building programme, involving 275 major school building projects and an additional 80,000 school places to meet demographic increases. The capital provision includes €65 million under the Government's stimulus initiatives, which include funding for the development of the new DIT campus at Grangegorman, which I visited recently and found hugely impressive, and for 28 additional school building projects.

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The latest expenditure data available for my Department relates to the period up to the end of August. At that time, net overall voted expenditure by the Department's Vote was €5.115 billion. This was made up of €4.828 billion in current expenditure and €287 million in capital. These figures are more or less on target, with current spend just €7 million behind profile while capital is €6 million ahead.

To date in 2014, a total of 31 large scale school capital projects, comprising 23 new school buildings and 8 large scale extensions, have been completed. It is expected that over 40 school projects will be completed by the end of the year, including seven schools that have come on stream under the public private partnership programme. In addition, the 2014 summer works scheme saw over 770 projects approved for works this year, with a total projected expenditure of over €70 million.

While the end-August expenditure figures for my Department are on target, the picture painted by the end-September figures will have an important bearing on the overall picture for 2014. This is due to the commencement of the new academic year, when the impact of additional students in schools and colleges will become known. A clearer picture of the number of teacher retirements will also emerge at that stage. I expect the end-year expenditure position to be quite tight, and the situation in this regard will be closely monitored by my officials over the weeks ahead. The position emerging in the September returns will also of course have an impact on expenditure for 2015.

The 2015 budget will be announced in three weeks' time on 14 October. The earlier budget date presents particular challenges for the education sector, given that the academic year only starts in September, when a clearer picture of the student population for the year ahead emerges. My Department will be required to make an earlier call than usual on the projected expenditure position for 2014 and its likely impact on requirements for 2015. This requires close attention in the lead-up to the budget and, as I already indicated, places particular importance on my Department's end of September expenditure figures. This is especially the case with regard to increases in student demographics, which impact on teacher numbers, capitation payments and other areas of spend on the Vote.

The determination of the overall budgetary strategy for 2015 will be finalised in Government discussions over the weeks ahead. In the circumstances, the Chairman will appreciate that I am very limited in what I can say in regard to these discussions at this time.

I am happy, together with Minister of State, Deputy English, to respond to any matters that committee members wish to raise.

Chairman: We will now go through programme-by-programme considerations, beginning with programme A. It will be in the usual order of the committee: first the Opposition spokespersons, then Government, and then everyone else. Programme A is first, second and early years education. We will allow 45 minutes for the discussion of this and I refer members to page 14 of the Department's brief and page 5 of the committee secretariat notes. We will begin with Deputy McConalogue, whom I would ask to be brief.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State to the committee and wish both of them the best in their new roles. I congratulate both on their promotions to the Department and to their positions. I also thank their officials for attending the meeting.

Is it the case that the Minister is seeking a €39 million reduction in the overall education budget in the coming year?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: That is what was in the original plan.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is for the current year. Does the Minister have any overall indication yet of what cuts or otherwise are expected in the coming year? Are there particular figures in the upcoming budget which the Minister has already identified as feeding into a reduction of the bottom line for the coming year?

A value-for-money report on small schools, including primary and second level education as well as pre-school, has been on the table of the Minister for Education for over 18 months. That has significant implications and recommendations for policy approaches at primary level. How can we discuss estimates and budgets without that being on the table and being published? This does not add up. Can the Minister update us about that and can she can give a commitment that it will be published?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Just to clarify what Deputy McConalogue said in regard to the next savings required in 2015, one of the slides states that a further €39 million will have to be saved in 2015.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Where is that stated?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: On page 3, it states, “keeping within the 2015 current expenditure ceiling a further net saving of €39 million is required in 2015”. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that. If that figure is correct, could the Minister clarify whether that €39 million includes previously announced cuts from previous budgets, such as multi annual cuts to funding, for example the capitation grants, the increase in the student contribution fee, or is that €39 million outside of what has already been announced? If that is the case, what is the total amount of net savings the Minister is seeking in the budget?

I have a couple of brief questions on programme A. They are policy issues which will feed into budget issues. One relates to the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, working group and the new model for allocation. I read the briefing document that the Minister received when she took up office. It states that the new model is not expected to be implemented next year, so I presume that there will be no funding set aside for that. The Minister might clarify that. The briefing document she received states that the new model might not be in place until 2016-17, which she might also be able to confirm.

The other issue I want to touch on briefly concerns new teachers. There is an amendment to the Teaching Council Act coming forward which relates to the vetting of new teachers. It only covers the teaching profession and excludes everyone else within a school setting. People like special needs assistants and caretakers will not be covered by the amendment. It states in the Minister's briefing document that there would be a risk in the appointment of SNAs to schools as a result of that vetting legislation. What steps will be taken in 2015 to address those delays or possible delays?

Deputy James Bannon: My question relates to transport to secondary schools. It is an issue I have raised with both Ministers in the past concerning the quality and provision of transport services to schools. There are situations where children and families are being totally discommoded. This involves the splitting up of families in certain cases where some of the siblings have to attend one secondary school and others have to attend a different school. This

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is unfair on the parents who sometimes have to try and fit in their own work schedules as well. It is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. It is essential, as I have stated time and time again, that we give our children the best educational system possible and this includes the provision of a good, safe transport service.

There is a situation - I hope I am forgiven for mentioning it - in the Edgeworthstown area of County Longford where five families - involving eight children in all - have no transport facilities to their designated school, Scoil Mhuire in Granard. This issue needs to be addressed. I have contacted the Department about it on a number of occasions. There is a public meeting taking place on the issue next Tuesday night because we have not addressed it. Children are not able to attend secondary school and in this day and age it is unfair on students that this should arise. I would appreciate if this whole issue could be looked at. Earlier today we were drawing up our schedule of invitees for the coming year. I suggested that we invite in the personnel from the transport section of the Department of Education and Skills. Some of the arrangements in place are totally unfair and there are simple solutions. In the Edgeworthstown case a second bus should be provided because it is a huge health and safety issue. It is not until something happens like what happened in County Meath a few years ago that we address problems like this.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I congratulate the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan and the Minister of State with responsibility for skills, research and innovation, Deputy Damien English, on their appointments.

How many people are in education on any one day in Ireland? How many of our citizens attend education from pre-school to adult education? How much money has been spent on the literacy and numeracy strategy to date? What evaluation has been made of it?

How much money has been spent on the reform of the junior cycle? We know what the political evaluation of this reform was because it generated a huge impasse in the last Minister's regime. This had a huge effect on the way people voted in the local elections. Objectively, how much money was spent? We know that 53% of the teachers are against the reform so far. What is the Minister's evaluation of it? Does she intend to revisit it in some way?

The question of how many young, middle-aged and older people are in education is very important. How many people are we educating on one day in this country, from pre-school through to mature education, adult education and so on?

Senator Averil Power: I welcome the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy O'Sullivan and the Minister of State, Deputy English, to the committee. I wish to focus on the priorities for the budget for next year, and particularly on areas that have had a cut over the last few years. What will be the Minister's priorities if indeed the Government does have more resources in the next budget?

One of the areas that has taken a hit has been special needs education. Although the SNA cap was raised a little last year, the 85% rule for resource teachers means that the resources the children are getting are now no longer linked to their educational needs. They are being affected by an arbitrary cap. Does the Minister see this as a priority area if resources are available?

The same question applies to the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, which is seriously under-funded. This issue has come up many times in the committee when we have had special needs groups in. Parents and schools cannot get assessments through NEPS. This

creates an inequity where the only people who can get assessments are those who can afford to pay for them. If the Government has some leeway then rather than there being competition between the two parties on tax cuts, I believe we should be reversing some of the damage that has been done to the most vulnerable over the last few years, including children with special needs.

In the same vein, the slides that we were given state that the DEIS schools have been protected over the last few years from cuts, which is not the case. However, I have received correspondence yesterday from the school completion programme in Killinarden, which has taken cuts of 30% over the last few years. Is that something the Minister would revisit if resources are available next year?

On the early education side, is the Minister aware of the report on the free pre-school year and its impact in disadvantaged areas, which was published last May? The report was clear in saying that the free preschool year has not closed the gap between children from disadvantaged areas and other children in the same age cohort. It says that there are a number of reasons for that. It is too late when a child is three or four years of age, he or she is already far behind. It is only a half intervention, a half day for some of the year, and it does not engage with families. Early education has always been the poor relation in the Minister's Department, scattered between the Departments of Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs. Sometimes it is not clear who exactly is in charge of what. It is an area to which we have never dedicated the kind of resources that we need, particularly from an early intervention point of view.

I would link that with the school completion programme and similar programmes, because the research to which I referred showed yet again that it is not just educational interventions in the schools that work in disadvantaged areas. Work with families and parents, so that they can support their children, is also needed. That is why cuts to programmes such as the school completion programme, which do that type of work, are especially dangerous. They have torn away some of the improvements that had been made. I ask that the Minister makes that a priority.

Regarding the Minister's approach to the school patronage issue, this was identified as a particular priority by her predecessor when he took up the job as Minister for Education and Skills. There has been virtually no progress made. There was a report on patronage and transferring schools, and what would be done with the 1,700 schools that would remain as stand-alone schools. We have seen two or three schools change their patronage over the last few years and that is it.

There still remains an issue, on which the Minister was quoted this morning in one of the newspapers, around the teaching of religion and how we ensure that all of our schools are welcoming to children of all backgrounds and that they make appropriate provision for them. What would be the Minister's priorities in this regard? The former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, was addressing that issue by divesting off some schools, creating a situation where we have the Catholic school, the Protestant school and the Educate Together school. I believe that is going down the wrong road. It is an issue we have discussed previously in the committee. We end up with children segregated on religious grounds in a way that has not existed in the past, because the Catholic schools - notionally Catholic - had been taking children of all faiths and were doing their best. Now the teachers are working in awkward situations, such as the one produced by the rule in regard to priority given to religious education, an issue on which the Minister was quoted this morning.

I do not believe that a segregation system is the best way to proceed. We need to look at how we can take all of our existing schools and make them more welcoming and how we change

the rules in regard to religious education. This was a priority for the Minister's predecessor, at least a stated priority at the start of his term. What is the current Minister's perspective on it?

Senator Mary Moran: Many of the issues have been raised but might I ask the Minister for her views on small primary schools and the returns for 30 September pertaining to the projected numbers of incoming students? Schools are provided with teachers depending on their projected enrolment up to 30 September and some may not reach that number. I have been contacted by a school that will be one student short of the projected number it had hoped to get and will now lose a teacher. A class will go from having 21 students on 24 October when the school gets the mid-term break to having 32 students when the students return. There will be an increase of 11 students in the classroom after Hallowe'en. There will also be eight, nine, ten and 11 year olds in that classroom which is huge pressure to put on any teacher. This issue is also related to matters dealt with last week and the media coverage of the JobBridge scheme. Will any exceptions be made for small schools which will not reach the quota and will have the added challenge of children of many ages in the classroom? What are the Minister's views on the effect of JobBridge and the media coverage relating to the use of JobBridge to employ SNAs?

On back to school costs, towards the end of 2013, a survey was initiated by the former Minister, Deputy Quinn, which I wholeheartedly welcomed, seeking the views of parents, particularly on the school uniform. The results of this survey were to be reported in February 2014. I have been trying to get information on this report and find out exactly how many schools replied. If schools did not reply, is there anything we can do to ensure they do? We are waiting for the parents' charter and I look forward to its publication. In the meantime, is there any additional way - this is important in terms of school costs - that we get the views of parents and schools and increase the interaction between parents and the schools?

I also wish to ask the Minister about the qualifications of teachers in schools catering for students with special needs. I have received representations from people who have children in special schools but the teachers do not appear to have the appropriate qualifications. The teachers have primary school teaching qualifications and they have been vetted and so forth. However, I am of the view that teachers in schools catering for students with special needs should have training - either through their teacher training courses or an additional course - to equip them to deal with the very specific extra demands that arise in teaching children with special needs.

Will the Minister comment on the progress that has been made on the junior cycle?

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh, agus ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a ghabháil don bheirt seo go pearsa as bhúr bpostanna nua agus guím ráth Dé oraibh san obair atá romhaibh.

Senator O'Donnell has raised the issue of literacy and numeracy and the junior cycle and I, too, would like to hear the Minister's views on that. Throughout the country, many people are saying that history should be retained as a core subject. I was in east Belfast lately and heard from people who bemoaned the little amount of history taught at school. Perhaps we are regressing in that regard. I would ask the Minister to consider that in her budget strategy.

The issue of value for money was raised by Deputy McConalogue. It is not possible to make further decisions on small schools until we have the appropriate information. The matter has been discussed at considerable length. The education and training boards, ETBs, are very important and they are just starting off this year. It is important that they are resourced properly

and that they get a discrete capital budget and a discrete summer work scheme. One matter I wish to address in particular - and this was dealt with in the briefing - is that for the third consecutive year non-fee charging schools at primary and post-primary levels were protected. Fee paying schools were also protected last year for the first year in three years. Will that continue?

Chairman: Senator Naughton has arrived. I am taking only questions in relation to first, second and early years education.

Senator Hildegarde Naughton: I welcome the Minister. Under what subhead does the pay for school chaplains come? I think that is in programme A. The Minister may not have the figure to hand at the moment. I had difficulty getting the exact figure for last year. I know it was in excess of €9 million a number of years ago; the Minister may need to revert on that figure. I ask because, although I have no fixed view on the matter, I wonder if that figure would be warranted having regard to the cuts that have taken place - it could go towards SNAs, for example, but that is something we could discuss.

On the implementation of the action plan on bullying and schools patronage, I note from the research by DCU that 79% of teachers are aware of bullying in schools. It is clear that education is key to tackling this. It is important that we promote an awareness of bullying and how to deal with it and how to tackle it in schools. Is the Minister seeking to increase the allocation for the coming years for that important issue?

Concerning higher education, what is the Minister's view on the present funding arrangements, in particular on student loans programmes as operated elsewhere as an alternative funding method?

Chairman: That would be programme C. Before I revert to the Minister, Senator Power raised the issue of patronage. It is one we have looked at in this committee indirectly when considering the admissions to schools legislation. I concur with what Senator Power says. The diversity of patronage approach - certainly in my community - is leading to segregation of pupils along many different lines, including racial. We are dividing people and sending them to different schools rather than educating them in the local community school. We need to examine this. There are many issues for the Minister to deal with.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will do my best. I will respond to a few individuals together who raised the same questions. I thank the committee for engaging on issues like patronage and I will revert soon on the admissions to schools Bill when it is brought through the Oireachtas. We will have an opportunity to engage, in more depth, on some of these issues.

Deputies McConalogue and O'Brien asked about the coming year and the projected cuts and expenditure ceilings. A sum of €39 million was the original expenditure ceiling projected for our Department for this coming year. That was part of the projections across all Departments that were to yield what was to be approximately €2 billion in cuts. Thankfully the economy has moved on since then. We are in a budgetary negotiation at the moment but that would have been the cut, should we have stood still in terms of the demands on expenditure and taxation, etc. Each budget is different and we are in a different situation at the moment. I do want to say to the committee that there are pressures, particularly demographic pressures, so there are extra costs simply because there are more children at all levels in education. Those are not just costs around teachers and capitation, but also costs around school transport, student grants, etc. Those demographic pressures mean that with the same amount of money as we had last year we have extra demands. That is the context in which the €39 million sits.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Is that inclusive or exclusive of previously announced multi-annual cuts?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is exclusive.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Can the Minister say what that additional cost will be, based on next year's projections?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: There were four areas in which cuts were carried from previous budgets into this year's one. There was the 1% reduction in primary and post-primary capitation. There is the further 1% reduction in capitation rate for the vocational training opportunities scheme, VTOS; Youthreach; the back to education initiative, BTEI; the post-leaving certificate, PLC, programme; and adult literacy. There is the further 1% reduction in core pay and non-pay for higher-education institutions and there is the increase of €250 in the higher education student contribution.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: What is the monetary value of those four cuts?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We cannot exactly quantify those until we know the numbers, when we get into September. A sum of €30 million is approximately what will come in under those measures.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Can the Minister give an estimate of the additional cost to the Department next year for teachers, buildings, and school transport, for example, as a result of the increased number of students?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I cannot give exact figures but I think it is about €55 million to €65 million if everything is included. These are the kind of figures that we must talk to our colleagues about.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: It is important that we clarify figures. Will the savings for next year for those four identified multi-annual cuts that have previously been announced amount to €30 million?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Roughly, because we do not know exact numbers.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Roughly. Originally we were looking at €39 million, but negotiations are ongoing. We are looking at a minimum of €30 million savings next year in education.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will not carry out negotiations here at the committee but we are close enough to the budget now. We have already engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will continue to do so. I cannot give Deputy O'Brien any exact figures at this stage but I think he knows the ballpark in which we are operating.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Is there likely to be €30 million in savings built in from last year's budget in next year's figures? And is the Minister facing potential increases in costs of €65 million as a result of demographic pressures?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: They are very much average figures. Other things could also come into play, in terms of other items of expenditure. I do not want it to appear too simplistic, but these are the kind of figures that are in the mix at the moment.

Perhaps I should go on to some of the other issues. I intend to publish the value-for-money report on small schools as soon as my Government colleagues and I have finished considering the report and its recommendations. This may have been said before but that is the position. I have had discussions with all the partners in education at this stage and a number of them have raised this issue and have concerns about it, so I am sure that I will have a number of further engagements with the committee on this.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Can the Minister give a more definite answer?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I do not know when-----

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, was considering the value-for-money report for perhaps 18 months with everyone and yet nobody seems to have seen it, apart from the Minister and Minister of State and the officials. It is not acceptable that it sits on the table for that amount of time. It is a delaying tactic.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I would like to deal with it as quickly as possible but I need time to discuss it with colleagues.

Deputy O'Brien raised the issue of the new model for special education and that was also raised, I think, by Senator Moran and some others as well. We do not expect it to be ready for next year but it could be. The committee has seen the draft proposals. There must be widespread consultation. Some members of the committee are probably aware that the NCSE is holding public meetings around the country at the moment to advise parents, particularly those with younger children with special learning needs who will be entering the school system. I cannot say for sure that it will not be next year but it is more likely to be the following year. We have continuing upward pressures with regard to the needs of children with special educational needs. For example, there are an extra 480 resource teachers this year and there are also extra special needs assistants, SNAs. That is simply to deal with existing needs.

There will be ongoing discussions, but I do not think it will be ready for next year. However, I am not certain so if it is ready and if there is a general view that is the right thing to do, it may be implemented. There is particular concern about the fact that people must get diagnoses at a very early stage and that in some cases they must pay for it even if they cannot afford it. All these issues are of concern and they are all part of the reason this review is taking place. However, that is as accurate as I can be on the timing.

On the vetting of new teachers, the Teaching Council only has responsibility for teachers. There has been a problem with vetting both because of the time it takes and the need to re-do it if someone gets a new job. The idea here is that the Teaching Council would do the vetting, so that this problem of delays for teachers would no longer be an issue. Other people who work in schools are vetted, not through the Teaching Council, but through other systems, so anyone who works with children must be vetted.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: In the Minister's briefing it says that there may be a risk of delay in appointing those people because of the delays in vetting.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: That refers to SNAs, etc. That is simply because of the general delay in vetting. There are problems with delays in vetting across the system and it causes problems for community organisations, for community employment, CE, schemes right across the system. Last year extra resources were put into the vetting office and that is under constant review in order to speed up the process but that is the reason why there is delay in that area.

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If we use the Teaching Council it should speed up the process specifically for teachers but the other issue is part of a general problem of delays in vetting, and we are working as a Government across Departments to address it. I will ask my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, to answer Deputy Bannon's question.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Damien English): I have a couple of questions to deal with. I cannot deal with a specific case here as it would not be appropriate, but I have discussed this case with the Deputy and hopefully we will get an answer on that.

There are pressures in this area. The budget for school transport has gone down by 8% or 9% over the last three or four years. There is an issue of demographics and pressure from other areas, so many changes have been brought in. In the 2011 budget the rules did change, which is causing much confusion. This change also causes a situation where families might be availing of transport to one school but siblings cannot follow to the same school. That is a difficulty. The rules changed three years ago and that will cause a problem for a number of years while each family adapts to the new rules.

The situation to which the Deputy refers is slightly different. Generally we try to find a solution to any issue that is brought to us but we must ensure that the rules are applied in the same way across the country and are applied fairly. I would be very strong on that; there must be fair implementation of the rules across the board. However, if there is a situation where a problem can be solved, we will try to solve it, within the constraints. The Deputy's situation is a little different and we will examine it. In general it is an area under pressure. The budget has been reduced and there was a value-for-money review back in 2011, which brought in changes. I think in the long run these changes will be right, but they will cause difficulty in the first few years of implementation.

Deputy James Bannon: I was surprised at the reason given by a Department official to the principal of the school that they did not apply in time online for a transport service.

Deputy Damien English: As I said, I will not go into any individual case.

Deputy James Bannon: That is not an acceptable excuse.

Deputy Damien English: Every case raised through me is investigated and I will come back to the Deputy on that.

Chairman: There is a forum for that, where the Deputy could get a specific answer, in the Dáil itself or-----

Deputy Damien English: I am happy to meet the Deputy, there is no problem with that, and we will go through it all but this is not the forum to do it. There is an issue. The new online system has also caused difficulties but I think people will be able to use that system much earlier from this school term onwards and that will solve that problem.

Deputy James Bannon: There is a problem in rural areas that the Department is not aware of: poor quality or non-existent broadband. That is a huge issue across rural Ireland. We cannot expect people to go online where broadband is non-existent. Provision should be made for those types of situation.

Deputy Damien English: Broadband is an issue across many Departments, and hopefully

we will see improvements in that area, but that is separate from this issue of school transport.

Deputy James Bannon: Well, it is interlinked.

Deputy Damien English: It is quite separate, but anyway.

Chairman: Minister, are there any other issues?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes, there are. Next was Senator O'Donnell, who asked me some hard sums. We have been doing the sums here on the total numbers in education. I will give the breakdown first and then state the total at the end. I can supply the figures fully later on. There are approximately 65,000 in early childhood education, 536,317 in primary education, 333,213 in post-primary education, 165,000 in full-time higher education and 56,000 in training and apprenticeships, adding up to a total of approximately 1,165,530. That does not include people studying part-time at third level.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is an incredibly positive answer, when one thinks of a country that has 4.6 million people. It is a major factor in why we are around this table. It is something that we should talk about more readily. I know we have many problems, but it is huge, how we take education so magnificently seriously.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the Senator for raising that question. It is an interesting one.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It might be something that the Minister could use when she is batting. But the other two are more serious, dig-down questions.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We are just trying to get the figure for the literacy and numeracy strategy. I will come back to the Senator with it. We do evaluate it and there is strong evidence that it is working.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I would like to see both of those - the cost and the evaluation - in whatever form is possible.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is an area that we need to continue to work on. When I was in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government I launched the Right to Read campaign in the libraries. Literacy and numeracy needs to be part of a strategy not only in schools but also right across other elements of society.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I would like to see the evaluation and how the strategy is being evaluated.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will get those figures for the Senator in a minute. We have not got them yet.

Junior cycle reform is really only starting. We are only starting with English this year. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has done all the preliminary work in terms of developing the curriculum, etc., and is continuing to do that.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: How much is the NCCA costing? It is costing millions, is it not?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is a State-funded body and it does work right across the system in terms of curriculum and assessment. Its costs for junior cycle reform would presumably be

VOTE 26 - UPDATE ON PRE-BUDGET AND POLICY ISSUES: MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS part of the cost of running the organisation anyway. There is some teacher education involved, which has commenced, but again, I am going to have to give the Senator the figures later.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: This is very serious, because I am getting generalised answers, which the Minister may be right in giving me, but there is an impasse around this. A lot of money was put into the NCCA. There were many votes against it at local level, and I think that a national curriculum-----

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is only just commencing, so the costs will really start to escalate in future years, more so than in this particular year.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Commencing is one way of putting it, because a lot of people are not commencing; they are refusing to do it. I wonder how great the commencement is.

Chairman: Is the Minister saying she will have the figure later in the meeting?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes. We hope to have a figure later in the meeting.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Fair enough, but I would really appreciate the outline of those figures in relation to the number of people in education.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I have not got it on a printed piece of paper at this stage. I will come back to the Senator on both of those other questions.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Exactly what the NCCA is paid is here in the documentation somewhere. It is a huge amount of money.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It does a lot of other work - a very wide range of work.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I know it does, but I would like to know what was spent on it.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Will I continue with the other answers and then we can come back to this? Senator Power asked about special needs as well.

Senator Averil Power: The question was about the 85% cap. Provision is no longer based on educational need but is subject to an arbitrary cap.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Every child who is deemed to need support gets support. There have been cuts that none of us has liked but we hope to be in a position to increase funding in the near future. We have increased funding on special needs education in terms of the number of resource teachers, SNAs, etc. I welcome Senator Power's statement about the importance of services and that it is important to maintain funding for services generally. Education, obviously, is the one I am particularly concerned with, but there are other services as well.

I also absolutely agree with Senator Power on early education. Since I came into office I have said that it is a priority for me and it will continue to be one. I am setting up an advisory group on early childhood education and I have also commenced an evaluation of all the training and education courses that people working in the area of early childhood education undertake. It does need a lot of cross-departmental work, as it goes across two Departments. My responsibility is for the educational content, while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for other elements. I intend to have quite a strong involvement in terms of the

educational content. Part of that is setting up the advisory group and examining the courses that educate people in that sector. I am very keen to ensure that we have well educated, highly skilled people in that sector.

I do believe in evaluation in that sector. We need to continue to monitor it. It would be great if we could roll out a second early childhood year, but we do not have the money to do it at the moment.

Senator Averil Power: The key point in the report from May concerned the evaluation of the existing year. It does not recommend evaluating the existing year because of quality problems with what is being offered. One of the biggest issues in the sector is actually quality, which is on the Minister's side rather than that of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: That is why I am addressing it.

Senator Averil Power: The accepted wisdom in rolling out the ECCE year was that it would be particularly good for children in disadvantaged areas whose parents could not afford private child care. The evaluation actually shows that this is not true. The ECCE year did not close the gap at all because those children were just getting the same interventions as everybody else. Everybody was lifted a little bit, but the gap between the two cohorts of children was just as severe. The lesson to be taken from that is very clear in the report that the Government commissioned. I appreciate that decisions are being made about whether to provide a second preschool year or whether there are other priorities in child care. If the Minister is genuinely serious about tackling disadvantage and about early intervention for children who need it most, she will pause and consider that report, instead of giving everybody a little bit in the two and a half hours. She should establish proper early-years intervention programmes for children from disadvantaged areas and children with special needs, who are getting virtually nothing at present, as well as for areas where there have been severe cuts to programmes, such as Jigsaw in Darndale and the community crèches. The Minister is giving to everybody with one hand but damaging others.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: As the Senator knows, the Early Start programme has been there since the time when Niamh Breathnach was Minister for Education. We have that intervention, which is specifically for particularly disadvantaged areas. I have a very strong commitment in this area and I intend to ensure that we do improve the quality.

Senator Power also asked about patronage. I will be continuing the work that former Minister, Deputy Quinn, did. There are basically three strands to what he began in patronage. One is that there would be a survey of parents with the new schools. The second one is around divestment of schools. Everyone is aware of this so I will not go into the detail. The third one is to do with inclusivity in all schools. That is the area to which both the Chairman and Senator Power have a particularly strong commitment. It is an ongoing process.

I was asked about the allocation for the NCCA. The answer is €4 million and 33 staff. Costs for literacy and numeracy issues were €9 million in 2014. Junior cycle reform cost €4.8 million in 2014 and €1.5 million in 2013. I will provide the figures in writing later.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Will the Minister indicate how much we are spending on reform of the junior cycle?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The figures I have given are for 2014. The budget for 2015 remains to be decided in the coming budget.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I am sorry, but I missed what the Minister said. The staff cost of the NCCA is €4 million for a total of 33 staff. How much money has been spent on reform of the junior cycle to date?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I know that was the question. I do not think the NCCA has a breakdown of the amounts of staff time spent specifically on the reform, but if I can get any more detail I will provide it to the Senator. That is all the information I have on the matter.

Chairman: One issue to consider would be whether the NCCA took on extra staff to deal with the reform programme.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: No, I do not think so. It is my understanding that it did not. Existing NCCA staff were involved.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Is the Minister saying that reform of the junior cycle was entirely contained in the office with the 33 staff?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: No, I did not say that.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I know, but I am asking the question of how much money has been spent on the reform of the junior cycle to date.

Chairman: The Minister provided figures.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: There were consultation meetings around the country on the reform of the junior cycle. How does one quantify the cost of those?

Senator Averil Power: The budget is one area of concern. It is a separate question to ask how much money was spent on training.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I outlined the expenditure to run the NCCA, but the entire junior cycle reform did not happen in the NCCA.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I am aware of that.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: There is a consultation process. The roll-out of the reformed junior cycle is ongoing. The process has only started.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Given the thousands of impasses with which the reform of the junior cycle has been met, there must be a cost implication for the Department of Education and Skills. I want to know what was the cost. The process is choking.

Chairman: Could the Minister provide the two figures again?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will repeat those figures. They are the ones from the Department. They are €4.8 million in 2014 and €1.5 million in 2013.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That was expenditure on the NCCA.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: No, that is departmental expenditure. The figure for the NCCA is separate but only a portion of it relates to time allocated to the junior cycle reform. If Senator O'Donnell wishes to return to the issue in future, we will try to break down the figures further.

I will return to questions asked by other members. I agree with Senator Moran that the 30 September deadline is an issue for schools. There are dates and times when one has to reach

certain numbers due to pupil-teacher ratios. The rationale behind the 30 September date is based on the notion that if a school expects to get more children in over the summer then it can make a case. I do not know whether I can relax the regime. The date is firmly set at this stage, but I will examine the system and revert to the Senator. There is always a reluctance to change any of those figures because then it becomes unfair on someone else, elsewhere in the system.

Senator Mary Moran: My intention was just to make the Minister aware of the additional problems faced by schools. I fully appreciate that.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will respond briefly to the question on JobBridge and special needs assistants, SNAs. I have spoken publicly on the matter. JobBridge should not displace any job. That is the bottom line as far as we are concerned. The Department of Social Protection, which administers JobBridge, did remove some advertisements because they were considered to be inappropriate for schools. Extra SNAs have been allocated.

Another question was on the survey the previous Minister, Deputy Quinn, carried out on school uniforms and back-to-school costs. Another element of back-to-school costs is the book rental grant, which continues into next year and the following year. The sum of €5 million per year for three years for book rental schemes has been built into the figures. The first year has been allocated and there are two more years to go. We asked all schools to carry out the survey. We cannot force them to do so, but I have asked any parent who spoke to me on the issue to go back to the school and ask it to carry out the survey if it has not done so. To the best of my knowledge, I do not have the power to tell them they have to do it.

Senator Mary Moran: Could we be more forceful in the approach taken? We are trying to reduce back-to-school costs. Some schools insist that school jumpers can only be bought in certain places and parents can struggle to do that. In my town, rules and regulations are set by schools. Polo shirts must have the school crest even though they could be bought in a pack of two for a quarter of the price. It is an area of concern.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: A lot of people feel very strongly about the issue. I am asking parents' councils to give me feedback on the surveys.

Chairman: A Barnardos survey indicated that some schools-----

Senator Mary Moran: I met with Barnardos yesterday and there was discussion of the book rental scheme. I agree with the Minister that it is great for the schools that were included but I received many representations from schools that already had a book rental scheme - I am sure other members did too - and additional money was made available to other schools. It is important to commend schools that had already introduced book rental schemes and that feel penalised because they did not get as much money.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes. Senator Moran also inquired about the position with junior cycle reform, as did Senator O'Donnell. There is generally a strong commitment to junior cycle reform, but teachers are concerned about specific issues, mainly relating to assessment rather than the form of the curriculum. I have had one meeting with them already and I intend to meet them again in October. I have engaged with all of the other education partners on the issue as well. The concept of reform is positively received. I do not wish to say more about it as I intend to give teachers the space they need. I will now turn to what Senator D'Arcy said.

Senator Mary Moran: I am sorry, but I had one more question about qualifications.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I am sorry about that. I will revert to the Senator on the matter. I do not think there is an absolute requirement to have special qualifications, but it is something we can consider.

Chairman: We are due to consider special needs and we could incorporate the issue into that meeting.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: There are specific courses available for people teaching in those schools.

Chairman: We must proceed.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will be very quick. Senator Jim D'Arcy raised the issue of small schools. I responded to that question already.

Education and training boards, ETBs, have been excellent in terms of how they have dealt with reform and change. I met with the heads of all the ETBs. I accept that they have issues, and we are addressing them. They have big demands on them but, by and large, they have responded really well to what is being expected of them.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: What I want to know is whether the two gentlemen concerned are happy with the capital and the budget. Is there any problem with the summer works scheme?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We are probably straying into another area.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Yes; we are straying into the next programme. We will leave it at that. My other question related to fee-paying schools.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Again, I cannot pre-empt what will happen in the budget. I am afraid that is as much as I can say on the matter. I will revert to Senator Naughton on her question.

There are significant programmes on bullying. The most recent announcement on the issue related to funding for parents' councils to provide training for parents and members of boards of management.

Chairman: We had agreed we would allocate 45 minutes for the discussion and we have exceeded that. If members agree, we could provide another five minutes for debate, but speakers must be brief. We will then move on to the next programme.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I wish to follow up on a point made by my colleague, Senator Power, on early years education. Could the Minister clarify what the working group she is to establish will do and what its timeline is?

What plans does the Minister have specifically on supporting quality and curriculum roll-out at preschool level? Does she believe more resources will be required for the area next year? I believe approximately 20 Aistear co-ordinators were sent out recently to implement the Aistear curriculum at preschool level across all preschools. That is the sum extent of what the Department is currently doing to ensure a curriculum is being taught and staff are trained in how to teach it at preschool level. It is just skimming the surface and will not have an impact or address the serious issues that arise.

On the minor works grant and the summer works scheme money was not set aside last year

in the Estimates or in the-----

Chairman: We will come to that, it comes under the capital programme.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I refer to primary and secondary level. Does it come under this heading?

Chairman: Is that on the capital services budget?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is under subhead D in that case. That is fine, we will come to that later. On the back-to-school costs survey, the former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, made a big brouhaha about carrying it out and publishing it. He followed it up shortly afterwards with a big banner at the Labour Party conference about how the Labour Party is working to reduce back-to-school costs. There has not been a word about it since. The headlines appeared in the newspapers. The survey was sent out and there has been no interest to find out whether it will actually be implemented, whether it had any impact on the ground or anything else. We hear the Minister speak today about how she might consult with parents' representatives to see if they heard anything about what happened to it. That is simply not on. It just shows that it was nothing more than a gimmick. What we have seen from the Government as opposed to what the Labour Party banner had said at the conference about reducing back-to-school costs, is back-to-school costs for parents increased more in the past three years than under any previous Government. There was the withdrawal of the minor works grants and the summer works scheme, which we will deal with later, and the reduction in capitation grants which has been introduced consecutively over three years. We also had the move by the Minister's colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, to halve the back-to-school grant at secondary level and to cut it by a third at primary level. Overall, through all those measures, more than €100 million was taken out of the pockets of schools and parents in respect of covering back-to-school costs.

Chairman: The Deputy said he would be brief. He had three minutes but he has spoken for five minutes.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will try to be as brief as possible. What I am hearing is that the Minister is not going to follow up on the survey and she is pointing to the-----

Chairman: Allow the Minister to respond. I have to bring in Deputy Ray Butler.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: ----- €5 million for school books which is important.

Chairman: To be fair, I have to bring in Deputy Ray Butler.

Deputy Ray Butler: The book rental scheme was a huge success. A survey report came through this committee which among other issues referred to donations to schools. There are schools in my area asking for €100 per locker key. If students do not give the €100 they do not get the key. Therefore, children have to carry their school books and school bags around until they give €100. In my area there are schools with an enrolment of between 500 and 600 pupils, therefore the cost works out at approximately €50,000 to €60,000. Do the Department or the schools themselves hold accounts on these donations and where do the donations go? It is discrimination against students and amounts to huge pressure on parents. I have had many parents in my constituency office saying they could not afford the €100 or the €150 for two students. Basically, we are going back to two for the price of one. What is going on with these donations is scandalous. If we were serious about the report conducted last year the Government should

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have said this has to stop because it is discrimination of the highest order. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, and ask him in the next 12 months to put an end to these donations.

Chairman: I call Deputy Jonathan O'Brien to be followed by Senator Mary Moran.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: That is the point I wanted to raise. We are talking about back-to-school costs. The largest school cost, the cost that increases year-on-year, is the voluntary contribution. The reason it is increasing is due to the cut in budgets to schools and capitation grants and those cuts have to be made up somewhere. Schools are operating on smaller budgets with more students and more pressures and the money has to be found somewhere. It is being found in the pockets of parents. That is the reality. The Deputy is right; there are schools that are withholding keys to lockers. One does not get a locker unless one hands over €120 in some cases.

We talk about bullying and the action plan on bullying. The knock-on effect of the policy of voluntary contributions is the poor girl or boy whose parents could not afford €120 and therefore does not get a key to the locker and is identified by other students as being poor and disadvantaged. Children being children will pick on him or her, call him or her names and bully him or her. The Department is washing its hands of the problem while the Minister has it within her power to abolish voluntary contributions. If she does that she will have to increase the funding provided to schools. By not tackling this issue head on, we are not only discriminating against children we are also leading to them being bullied in school.

Senator Marie Louise O'Donnell: They should not be allowed to dictate who gets what and when and where.

Senator Mary Moran: That is the point I am making, that schools can hold children to ransom. I saw it when I was filling in children's reports, as written across the top of them was "not paid" or "art money not paid" or something else; in other words they were blackmailed unless they paid the donation and did not get their locker. I have also seen letters seeking voluntary contributions coming from the chairperson of the parents council. Therefore, the parents council know who has paid and who has not paid. Can we not insist that schools complete that survey and see where all the money from the voluntary contribution is going? Can we not stop it? The same happened with retired teachers. I made a strong case on the issue. The recommendation from the Minister was that newly qualified teachers would be employed first but we cannot hold them to it. We need to be stronger and much more vocal and affirmative in cutting down on donations. As Deputy O'Brien said it leads to bullying.

Deputy James Bannon: Has there-----

Chairman: I said everybody has to be brief, because we have finished this item.

Deputy James Bannon: On another matter, has any recent survey been conducted on the roll-out of high-speed broadband to rural schools and, if so, when?

Chairman: That is a different programme. We will move on to that issue at a later stage.

Deputy Ray Butler: I would like to make the Minister aware that even in colleges the first moiety is due on 30 September.

Chairman: We will come to that later in the meeting. We agreed-----

Deputy Ray Butler: In some colleges one cannot go into the library if one has not paid. The parents of some students may not be paid until the end of the month and may be paid on a Friday. Their sons or daughters cannot go into the college library and take a library book because they have not paid

Chairman: The Deputy is talking about the student contributions.

Deputy Ray Butler: It is third level.

Chairman: We will come to that later in the meeting. We agreed a timetable.

Deputy Ray Butler: It has to stop.

Chairman: I invite the Minister to respond.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will go back briefly to the early years because Deputy Charlie McConalogue raised the issue again. The issue around the quality of the curriculum and the investigation into all the courses will take a matter of months. The advisory group will consider a number of matters on an ongoing basis. That is not a set period. Aistear and Síolta as the Deputy said are the two programmes for which the Department of Education and Skills is responsible in terms of the curriculum. I intend to appoint a small number of inspectors, not inspectors who will come in and close down but will assist in terms of the educational quality of the early years education. I am delighted that both members raised the issue and that they are interested in this area because it is an area in which I want to make a difference as Minister for Education and Skills. I will be happy to come back and deal with early years specifically in the committee.

The other issue raised by most members was around voluntary contributions, cuts, cutbacks and so on. I cannot let Deputy Charlie McConalogue's point go without saying the reason all those cutbacks happened in the past three or four years-----

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The reason people cannot afford to go to school is because of-----

Chairman: One speaker at a time, please.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is a bit rich to get a lecture on years of cutbacks from somebody in a party that presided over the reason we have the cutbacks.

Senator Averil Power: It is about choices.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I am not going to make any apologies for cutbacks in recent years. They were absolutely built in by the troika in collaboration with the Government of which Deputy McConalogue was a member. I want to ensure we have a better system for the future. That is why I am fighting very hard for the budget this year. We will try to go back to many of these issues in the coming years when there is more money in the economy. Unfortunately, we have not got it now and have not had it for the past few years.

I am somewhat concerned by the scenarios members have described where students are being denied access to lockers and so on.

Deputy Ray Butler: I am aware of several schools where it is happening.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will examine what can be done about voluntary contributions.

Chairman: The committee has recommended that such contributions be prohibited.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I do not know whether I can prohibit them.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Surely it is possible to do so.

Senator Mary Moran: The whole point is that the contributions are not actually voluntary.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Voluntary contributions by parents are permissible provided it is made absolutely clear that there is no compulsion to pay and that in making a contribution parents are doing so of their own volition. That is the policy.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is how it should be.

Senator Mary Moran: What is happening in some cases, however, is that students' locker keys are being withdrawn or a note is included in their report card pointing out that the contribution has not been paid.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Members have made strong and fair points on this issue. We will examine whether the voluntary contribution system is being administered correctly in schools.

Deputy Ray Butler: I asked the Minister whether the Department has any data for how much money is coming into schools via these donations. Do schools keep accounts showing that information?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It depends on the type of school involved. Schools are obliged to keep accounts setting out certain information-----

Deputy Ray Butler: Yes, but is the Department aware of how much money is coming into schools by way of these contributions?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It depends on whether the Deputy is referring to fee-paying schools or non-fee-paying schools.

Deputy Ray Butler: I am referring to donations to schools in which fees do not apply.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We have a certain amount of information-----

Deputy Ray Butler: That is not very helpful. It is like the Minister is saying, "Maybe I do and maybe I do not."

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will find out that information for the Deputy.

Deputy Ray Butler: It is a very important issue.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank members for raising it.

The broadband programme for post-primary schools is 95% completed and we hope to have it entirely rolled out by the end of the year. There are 55 schools remaining to be brought on board.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I have two brief questions on one-teacher schools and junior cycle reform costs.

Chairman: I ask the Deputy to be very brief, as we must move on to the next programme.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: Will the Minister confirm that the number of one-teacher schools created this year will be 40 or so, compared with ten last year? Is there any room within the Estimates to support these schools and will she comment on their viability in a context where numbers are increasing?

The process of junior cycle reform has commenced, but 10% of English teachers delivering the curriculum as of the first week in September have not participated in any training on it. Will the Minister comment on this?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We encourage teachers to participate in training. We have had discussions with the teacher unions on the reformed junior cycle, but the talks are suspended to allow a ballot to take place. I will be meeting again with union representatives in due course and hope that engagement will make a difference.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: Will the Minister comment on one-teacher schools?

Chairman: We have agreed to move on to the next programme. I have given the Deputy plenty of leeway.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: It is an important point.

Chairman: There are many important points. There may be time to address this one at the end of the meeting.

We will now move to programme B, skills development. I refer members to page 21 of the Department's briefing document and page 8 in the notes provided by the committee secretariat. This programme covers funding for SOLAS, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, and so on. I invite questions from members on this programme, beginning with Deputy Jonathan O'Brien.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: There has been a great deal of criticism of the Department when it comes to funding and so on, but I acknowledge that this particular area is the one in which we have seen the greatest reform. There has been all-party agreement on the Bills that have been brought before the Oireachtas dealing with QQI, further education and training, and the education and training boards, ETBs. We can all see the benefits of these developments. Will the Minister confirm whether there is a provision in the legislation such that where a patronage body withdraws from a school in a particular ETB area, there is capacity for the ETB to assume patronage?

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Subhead B5 on page 21 of the Department's briefing document deals with grants to SOLAS for further education and training activities. There are five education and training boards which do not have direct control over training activities in their functional areas. We have created children of a lesser God in the sense that five out of 11 boards must work under the chief executive officer of the adjacent board. I am not sure that is the best way of delivering skills training in these areas or the best use of resources. Will the Minister comment on that issue?

The Bills establishing the education and training boards and SOLAS, both of which were initiated in the Seanad, are two of the most important to be passed during my time in the Oireachtas. Is it time to designate the further education sector as a discrete sector with its own dedicated budget? As it stands, how, for example, does it fit into the summer works scheme? Are further education colleges able to avail of the scheme in the same way as second level

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schools?

Deputy James Bannon: In 2008 we saw how the management of FÁS had allowed its budgets to spiral out of control to the tune of well over €1 billion. What progress is being made in integrating that body's successor, SOLAS, with the new education and training boards that have been established throughout the country? How do we ensure the public can have confidence in this new entity after what happened with FÁS?

There was reference on the news this morning to the problems associated with the JobBridge scheme, including the incidence of school management availing of interns to clean schools and so on. All JobBridge placements are supposed to involve a training element, but there cannot be a great deal of training for these interns, given that cleaning is not a highly skilled profession.

Chairman: The Deputy's second question is only semi-related to the programme we are discussing, but I will allow it.

Senator Mary Moran: What level of training provision is being made in 2014? Specifically, how many training courses will be available between SOLAS, MOMENTUM and Skillnets and how does the number compare with that in previous years?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I have one further question relating to European Social Fund, ESF, funding. The departmental briefing document indicates that a proposal has been made to strengthen systems, which requires additional staffing. That request, we are told, is being finalised for submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is essential that these additional personnel are appointed in order to fully draw down the funding available under the ESF. Has that submission been made to the Department yet?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It has been brought to the Government by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There are a number of European funding programmes, including this one. The deadline for the submission of the preliminary application to the European Union was in July. That target was reached and there are ongoing discussions. The intention is that we will receive the funding required.

Deputy Damien English: I will respond first to Senator Jim D'Arcy's questions.

The issue of training centres is one I had to deal with in the Seanad on my first day in the job. It has moved on a little. The Department and SOLAS have been trying to facilitate negotiations between the ETBs involved with a view to assessing how to apportion either the funding or the places available. I believe a solution will be found in the majority of cases - I hope in all of them - but it is something we are watching. The process is being facilitated. It is a case of some ETBs having to work together. Historically, some of the training centres would have covered the geography but not the decision making. That is an issue which is being examined. We are trying to resolve it on the ground and in most cases it will be resolved, but I am keeping an eye on it, as it has been brought to my attention by a number of people, not all in the same area but in similar ones.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Have there been queries from more than one area?

Deputy Damien English: Yes, but the majority of queries would be from one area. We are working hard to resolve the issue.

With regard to the capital budget, we will spend any money the Oireachtas wishes to give

us. There is no direct capital budget in this area.

The Senator asked about where further education fitted in. It was discussed this morning and perhaps we should call it the “fourth pillar”. We probably need to insert it physically somewhere or give it a name. It comes after second level but before third level and is complicated, but perhaps we might give it a full title.

Senator Jim D’Arcy: I do not like to interrupt, but it is a very important sector.

Deputy Damien English: Correct.

Senator Jim D’Arcy: In this country the statistic is 70% with degrees. We are looking at it through the wrong end of the telescope. In Germany the statistic is 50% with degrees and it has a huge skills sector based on the guild system that has been in place for centuries. We must adopt a twin track approach to the issue of skills. As was said here previously, an apprentice - there will be 20 new apprenticeships - can move into the system and achieve a doctorate. It is not necessary to start everybody with a degree. The Minister understands this. That is the reason this should be considered a discrete sector within the education system.

Deputy Damien English: The Senator is correct. It is an area of major importance and the money spent on it reflects this, but that is not its reputation and we must correct this. A sum of €800 million is being spent across the various Departments involved. The skills people are given are needed in the economy. Employers wish to engage with the various programmes with a view to being able to fill the skills gaps of the future. It is not all about degrees; it is also about apprenticeships, training and so forth. The issue is the amount of money we are spending. In some cases, it is a major development for the people who take on these courses. It completely transforms their lives and they are then able to take up a job. There is a great deal happening in the area. The Department recognises this; we talk about it a great deal, but, in general, it is not getting the recognition it deserves. We have discussed this issue previously and can work on it. Many employers know the level of jobs availability next year and the year after that and are coming to the further education sector to see how we can ensure we will have people ready to take up these jobs. Undoubtedly, there is a great deal to be done.

Deputy Jonathan O’Brien has mentioned that this area has been subject to major reform. It has and many of the reforms are correct. Perhaps it has taken longer than many of us had hoped, but the reform has happened. We must now drive on and use these reform structures to drive the change that is necessary. Part of this will be to find its correct position and title in the education sector. We can work on this issue.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I support what the Minister of State said. We must value all of the routes people can take. The establishment of the new apprenticeship council is part of this, whereby we wish to broaden apprenticeships beyond the traditional construction area. There are many areas such as hospitality and IT in which apprenticeships are appropriate and we are anxious to include these sectors. I agree that we must value the sector in a way that it has not been valued previously.

Senator Jim D’Arcy: For years lip service was paid to that concept, but I am very confident, having listened to the Minister of State previously and the Minister today and after talking to Mr. O’Flaherty who is an excellent public servant, that in the next couple of years we will see a new attitude to the skills and training sector in the education system and greater self-esteem for those who take that route.

Deputy Damien English: Deputy James Bannon asked two questions, one of which was about JobBridge. That scheme is not within our area, but is within the remit of the Department of Social Protection. However, we are trying to work together across the Departments on the various training options, but as the scheme is not my responsibility, it would not be right for me to answer questions about it. It should be said the majority of people who go through JobBridge have a very successful outcome, as I observed in my previous role as a committee Chairman. There will always be cases where people will be unhappy with it and we must correct the problem immediately and move on. In general, however, the scheme is doing very well when compared internationally and I am happy with it. We work with the Department of Social Protection, as required, but it is separate from our area.

With regard to the reputation of SOLAS, how it will develop in the future and the previous body FÁS, FÁS has not been taken over fully by SOLAS. It is divided among Departments, but SOLAS has a very important role in developing the strategy for further education, setting out the policy and allocating money. I am very happy with this. The legislation provides that there must be a service level agreement between SOLAS and the Department. There are agreements between SOLAS and the stakeholders with which it engages such as the ETBs and so forth to provide courses. Already people have approached me, in my role as Minister of State, with issues about how SOLAS is judging and evaluating their schemes. I have checked all of them out and SOLAS is doing a great job to ensure it gets value for money and drive the proper reform and change required. In the past I would have had a concern about how the money was spent in this area, as did most members of the committee, but SOLAS is doing its job correctly to ensure it gets value for money.

Deputy James Bannon: Is the Minister happy that there are the necessary checks and balances?

Deputy Damien English: Yes, there are. SOLAS has a five year strategy, one of the key goals of which is getting value for money and targeted evaluation. The issue is how we evaluate the courses and monitor the outcomes. That did not always happen in the past. We all know this, as there are plenty of stories, but I will not go there. I am happy, however, that the current model for the future is the right one and that we will be able to track the position. Money will be spent wisely and, through the service level plans, we can adapt to what industry needs to fill jobs in the future in various areas. It is the correct model and we must build on it.

I can confirm that FÁS staff moved to the employment services of the Department of Social Protection, the ETBs and the training centres. SOLAS has approximately 200 of its 1,800 staff. I am happy that SOLAS has been designed correctly and will work well. We must now use the new system correctly and I hope we can do this.

Senator Mary Moran asked about the number of places available. I do not have the list of courses, but it is included in the five year strategy. The numbers of places are roughly the same at 270,000, but I can send the Senator the list of courses. The benefit of the new arrangement is that there will be service level agreements, which means that we can change courses as we proceed should that be necessary. Both SOLAS and the education training boards are up to the game in most cases. They know what must be done and that they must be flexible in what they deliver. There are many staff involved and many issues that still need to be resolved, but the effort will be to reflect what is needed in education and society.

Senator Mary Moran: What about the comparison made with other years?

Deputy Damien English: The figures are almost the same in the last couple of years. I will have the exact figures sent to the Senator. The figures for numbers of places available are the same, while the list of courses is more or less the same, but there might be changes in the titles. I will check for the Senator.

Chairman: I have a question about Quality and Qualifications Ireland. An issue was brought to my attention recently about the accreditation of language schools. Apparently a good deal of work is going on in QQI in this area at the moment. A member of the public raised the problem with me. The person took the view that there were inordinate delays in the processing of applications. Does QQI have sufficient staff? Has the issue of staffing come up with the Minister? Does QQI have sufficient staff to ensure it can process applications in a timely manner?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It has not been raised with me specifically. There will be a roll-out of a programme of action jointly involving our Department and the Department of Justice and Equality for language schools. It will be rolled out on 1 January next year. Schools will have to reach certain standards if they are to be included. An international education mark will be coming on-stream later in the year. The matter has not been specifically raised with me. I am unsure whether it has been raised with the Minister of State but I can check it out.

Deputy Damian English: No, it has not been raised with me directly. A policy change in this area was announced some weeks ago. There was a major effort on behalf of the Department to repair the reputation and to keep our reputation intact. This area lends a major boost to our economy and there is a great deal of employment in it. The spend coming into this country through the sector is important and one we want to build on. The Minister and I will be travelling to Asia in the coming months to increase the demand and to win more business for the education sector. It is a major area and therefore any policy changes should reflect and ensure that our reputation is intact. We can engage with whoever has concerns.

Chairman: I can get more details for you. Are there any other questions on that programme? No.

We will move on to programme C which relates to higher education. Programme C is on page 24 of the Department briefing document and page ten of the committee secretariat note.

Senator Averil Power: I am keen to raise the issue of priorities as we head into the budget discussions for next year. The figures in the presentation we have relate to cuts announced previously that will come into place in 2015. One of these is the €350 increase in the student contribution, something that has put considerable pressure on families that do not qualify for the grant. These people are just above the grant threshold. Currently, they must pay €2,750 per year, which makes a mockery of any claims that we have a free fee system in the country. We do not. It is a huge sum of money. A previous Government announcement indicated that contribution would rise to €3,000 next year. Will the Minister ensure it is a budget priority to reverse that cut? It is incredibly regressive. It is hitting people who are barely over the grant threshold and they are being hit with all the other extra charges as well. They are the squeezed middle.

Another priority should be to protect the maintenance grant. It has been severely hit in recent years. What is the position on the student assistance fund? Is there any scope within the Estimates for the current year? Will this be a priority for next year? The student assistance fund is discretionary funding in colleges to help students who perhaps have a grant that is inadequate. It allows them to get extra funding through the colleges from the allocation. It is also for those not entitled to a grant but who are in dire straits. Some students are not entitled to a

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grant because they are not deemed by the Department to meet the eligibility criteria for being independent from their family but they may have had to move out. There could be domestic violence situations and all kinds of difficulties which mean students do not strictly meet the Department's criteria but they have to live separately and are finding it difficult to cope. They turn to college assistance offices explaining that they will have to drop out of college unless something can be done to help them. The point of the student assistance fund was to have discretionary money to help people in difficult circumstances and hard cases.

The fund was cut from €8 million to €6.6 million this year. Last year the fund ran out in most colleges by November. Students started at the end of September or the start of October and the money was gone by November. Some people were in dire straits in February and March but the colleges could not help them because the funding was gone. In many respects it has been a direct reflection of the other cuts that have been made in maintenance grants and so on. This is funding of last resort for people who have been hit elsewhere but the fund has also been hit. It is not big money. The cut made this year was from €8 million to €6.6 million. Is there any scope in the remaining budget? The Department is ahead in some areas of expenditure and behind in others. Does the Minister have scope to do anything with the student assistance fund for the remainder of 2014? One of the Minister's priorities for next year should be to restore that funding.

Two years ago a once-off cut of €25 million was announced for the higher education institutions. It was not restored this year. Will it be restored next year? It was supposed to be a once-off cut but it has been carried on.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As Senator Power pointed out, €25 million was taken out of the third level sector last year and the colleges were told to take it from their reserves. It was the same the year before. Since an assessment was made in advance and the colleges had to make it up from reserves I presume there has been some monitoring of how that has worked out. What has the impact been in respect of the €25 million from the previous year and the €25 million that is being extracted this year? How is that impacting on the various institutions? Are some institutions finding it particularly difficult? Can the Minister provide an overview of how it is developing?

Another area is Gaeltacht grants for teacher training students. A grant was in place previously to cover the cost of students attending the Gaeltacht for a compulsory period as part of their course. How much was saved in the current year as a result of the removal of the grant? How much would it cost to put it back in place? We know that at third level it is becoming increasingly difficult for students in general to sustain themselves and for their families to sustain them. For teacher training students it is an especially troublesome financial burden.

My final question relates to third level funding in general. Where does the Minister stand in respect of the future with regard to this issue? The can has been kicked down the road and pressure has been piled on students to pick up the tab in the meantime. It has become increasingly difficult for many, especially those among the squeezed middle. Can the Minister provide an update on the reports she has received and what she intends to do next? What is the position in respect of the Higher Education Authority on the future of third level funding?

Chairman: Senator Power, you wanted to come back in?

Senator Averil Power: I have another question for the Minister on entry to medical education. As the Minister is aware, the health professions admission test was introduced some time

back. It was supposed to reform the entry process and ensure it would not be altogether based on people cramming for tests and getting the ultimate 600 points in the leaving certificate or 625 points with bonus points for mathematics. There has been much criticism of the system to the effect that people are now getting grinds for their leaving certificate points and for their HPAT. What is the Minister's view? Does she intend to reform it?

There was a briefing last week for graduate entry medical students. One issue raised was the extraordinary fees those concerned must pay for graduate entry courses and how they are struggling now to repay loans after they leave. I sent the Minister a letter on their behalf with their proposal for tax relief in the budget. Has Minister had a chance to review that? The graduate entry system, if used properly, is a good way of opening up access. Aside from people who did well first time around in the leaving certificate, it allows older students to go back and apply for graduate entry level. Initially at least it opened up access and there was far more diversity in terms of the type of students who were going into the programme from different backgrounds. That diversity is important for medicine. More recently, those students have been put off. My understanding is that for this year and last year we have been getting far fewer applications from disadvantaged areas or from less-well-off students because they are concerned that they will be unable to repay their loans. It is a major issue and I call on the Minister to consider it.

One suggestion has been put forward. Apparently there is a system whereby if a student does the training course for midwifery, the State will pay the fee if the student agrees to work within the State system for a certain time after graduating. Could we follow this precedent? Our country has a significant problem with training doctors who leave straight away and complete their training in Australia or elsewhere. This creates major problems for our health service. I hope that the Departments of Education and Skills, Health and Finance put their minds to this serious issue. To be fair, I only wrote to the Minister this day last week after a briefing. The reply I received from the Minister for Health was that this was solely an issue for the Department of Finance and that he had forwarded my letter to it for reply. I was unimpressed, given how doctors leaving the system after we train them is one of our greatest health issues. I hope the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan's reply will be more enlightened and engaged with the issue. This is not just a question for the Department of Finance. The Minister and her colleague, the Minister for Health, should be lobbying for change.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Regarding Senator Power's comments, does the Department have an opinion on the banks' disgraceful behaviour in respect of postgraduate fees? They sell loans at certain interest rates to students, some of whom are taking long courses in, for example, engineering, medicine, accountancy and veterinary medicine, but then leave them high and dry the minute they qualify and increase their interest rates by 3%, 4% or 5%. It is amoral. The Department of Education and Skills should take a lead or have an opinion on this matter. The Bank of Ireland is a disgrace for young medics. As education progresses and families lose income, they become more dependent on banks and students in certain areas must rely on grants to be able to afford university and accommodation. After their interest rates increase, those students are beggared for the next ten years. What kind of signal is this to young people who want to stay in and repay this country? Senator Power is correct - those people leave. Sometimes, they do it to leave their debts behind. Others do it because it gives them a better chance of repaying their debts without being beggared. I know for a fact that some must repay double what they have borrowed. The fees are significant.

We all know that a primary university degree is almost like holding a leaving certificate now. As such, someone must do postgraduate education to move up. Rightly so, but young

people who do this are choked financially by a bank to which we gave €3.75 billion to keep it open. Recently, a graduate entering into medicine discussed this matter with the committee. That person seems to have been left penniless. This is just one reason for young medics leaving the country. They will never be able to stand on their own two feet because they must give the banks their souls, breath, hearts and lungs on their borrowings.

The Department of Education and Skills should have a policy or conversation on this matter. Perhaps we could keep the interest rate at a certain level for a few years to allow people breathing space. Currently, those rates can double within three months of qualifying. That is amoral and unethical.

Chairman: Senator Power also raised the issue of student contributions to third level education. When tuition fees were abolished in 1997 or 1998, one of the reasons given was that the fee was considered a barrier to students, particularly those from lower middle-income backgrounds who could not qualify for grants because they were just above the threshold. The Higher Education Authority, HEA, recently drafted a report on student participation rates. It showed that, while many areas had experienced increases, some seemed to have seen decreases. Other factors may be involved, the figures are at draft stage and the report was a consultation document as opposed to a final report, but has the Minister considered the possibility that the increases in the student contribution over the years might be a barrier to attending third level?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I might deal with that issue first, as it was initially raised by Senator Power and everyone else mentioned it when referring to grants. Down the years, the Chairman has conducted a great deal of analysis of Professor Patrick Clancy's reports on who attends college. Since the methodology used in the most recent one was slightly different, I do not know whether it is comparable. The approximately 50% of students who receive grants do not pay that fee, so they are not in the mix, but fees may be a barrier to the ones just above the income threshold. This is an issue of which I am conscious and I thank members for raising it.

As the committee probably knows, the former Minister set up a group to examine the funding of higher education. It is not due to report until next year. I will be up front with the committee, in that I expect I will not be able to do anything about the extra €250 this year. The money is not there. As we mentioned at the start of questioning, the increase is built into the budgetary arithmetic. As such, it was a part of the budget even before I started discussing demographics, etc. When the report is finished next year, we must examine the issue rigorously.

To answer Deputy McConalogue's question, there is financial pressure on colleges. I have met the HEA and the Irish Universities Association, IUA. There is also pressure on institutes of technology, given increased demographics, etc. When we receive the report, we will need to address the contentious and difficult issue of the funding of higher education.

Senators Power and O'Donnell raised questions about banks, the health professions admission test, HPAT, graduate entry and students' difficulties in affording borrowings. I thank Senator Power for the letter I received from her. While it is technically a matter for the Department of Finance as a taxation issue, I will discuss it with the Minister for Finance and other colleagues. As it happens, he and I represent a constituency that has a graduate entry medical school, so we are familiar with the particular cost issues. The HPAT needs to be monitored in the colleges concerned to determine its effect.

Senator O'Donnell mentioned lending by banks. Clearly she feels strongly about this matter. The idea that banks would increase their rates is something about which we would all be

concerned. Ideally, if one is borrowing, one should have a sense of what it will cost in future. The Minister of State, Deputy English, and I have stated that we will raise this matter with the banks. Many banks have relationships with higher education institutes. Indeed, some have on-campus offices, etc. With that leverage, we should be able to put more pressure on them to ensure that they do not treat students in a way that is-----

Senator O'Donnell mentioned lending by banks. Obviously, she feels strongly about this matter. The idea that banks would increase their interest rates is

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: What is happening is appalling. This does not just relate to graduate medicine and engineering or people with long-stay education ahead of them. It will become a larger problem. Parents are learning that students must borrow. There was a time when they did not need to because their parents paid or money was available. American students all pay for their own education. They all borrow and pay back the loans and there is nothing wrong with that. If one wants one's child to go to university but one does not have the money, it is good that one can go to a bank and borrow the money. However, when a student qualifies, he or she should not be choked with debt for the rest of his or her life. It is outrageous, especially given that one can only earn 1% interest on deposits in banks at the moment but one must pay 7% to 9% interest on borrowings. What the banks are doing to undergraduates, post-graduates and their parents is amoral. It is a different kind of borrowing when one is borrowing for one's future education. There is a specificity about that. It is not about life generally but the specificity of education. The banks have closed down so many opportunities for young people. The Chairman is absolutely correct to call it apartheid because some students do not have the facility to borrow at all while others think that even if they did have the capacity to borrow, they will never be able to pay back the loans. I am appalled. I will be in a bank this coming Friday and I will make a public issue of this. Senator Power is absolutely right about the other aspects of this issue, including taxation. I am hitting this head on, like the Titanic because what is happening is disgraceful, particularly given the fact that we bailed the banks out. We keep forgetting that basic fact. It is almost as if that has gone away now. It is as if they are all back and we are all standing on board again but we are not. We are still paying for that bailout through the universal social charge. We see that every time we look at our pay packets or our pensions.

Deputy Damien English: I dealt with the banks a lot in the course of my work on another committee in the context of the cost of credit for businesses. We will use the same channels to raise this issue with them directly and see if we can get action on it. The Senator is right that they are strangling students. Obviously students are getting a reduced rate at the early stages and then the interest is being piled on. That puts too much pressure on students ---

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is piled on within three months of graduation.

Deputy Damien English: Yes. Students will take what they are being offered at the start because they need it to get an education. We need to work on that because students are under pressure to get the money and have very little choice. It is an issue we will take up with the banks and see what we can do. I agree with the Senator that it is very important.

Chairman: We do not much time left I am afraid. Are there any questions on programme D, capital services or on any other matters?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I forgot to say that I will get back to Deputy McConalogue on the issue he raised about the Gaeltacht.

Senator Averil Power: Does the Minister have any information on the number of schools that have become one-teacher schools?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We will get back to the committee on that question too.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Minister is probably more aware than anyone else on this committee of the value of the minor works and summer works schemes. When schools do not get minor work grants or qualify for the summer works scheme to do basic work on their premises, that feeds back into the cost of education because at the end of the day, somebody has to repair the heating or fix the roof and so forth. Inevitably, that cost falls back on parents. The minor works scheme was reinstated last year, having been cut previously and schools were very appreciative of that. I ask the Minister to bear that in mind in the context of the upcoming budget. There are knock-on effects from every budgetary decision the Minister makes and when schemes such as the ones I have mentioned are cut, the knock-on effect lands squarely on the shoulders of parents who are already being crucified with back-to-school costs. If the Minister is looking for ways to keep back-to-school costs down, enhancing the minor works and summer works schemes would be a valuable option in that regard.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank Deputy O'Brien for his comments. This is an issue that will be dealt with during the budgetary process. All public representatives recognise the value of these schemes for schools and understand only too well the amount of work that can be done under them. Unfortunately I cannot give the Deputy any definite undertaking on it at the moment because we have not begun the detailed budgetary process but I fully understand the value of the schemes in question. More than 700 projects have been approved under the 2014 summer works scheme, with a total projected expenditure of almost €71 million. That money has not all been spent yet - invoices are still coming into the Department.

Chairman: Senator D'Arcy asked if the colleges of further education qualify for summer works grants.

Deputy Damien English: They do qualify, yes. The training centres have their own summer works schemes, as I understand it.

Senator Averil Power: It depends on the year really. In some years, they have been given grants and in others they have been given nothing.

Deputy Damien English: That has been the same across the board but colleges running PLC courses, for example, would qualify under the schools capital programme. The arrangement is slightly *ad hoc* in that the education and training boards would make a case for a grant for a particular college. There is no clearly set-aside budget for such works.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: That is something that needs to change.

Deputy Damien English: Yes, in the context of the value of further education, that is something we can work on. As it stands at the moment, the process is slightly *ad hoc*. There is no capital allowance set aside as such.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Further education colleges can apply to the Department directly in some cases. I will provide more information on that to the committee.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I would like more information on that issue.

Chairman: Are there any other questions?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Would the Minister deal briefly with school building projects and the elimination of prefabs?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: All members will be familiar with the current programme and we will continue rolling that out next year. We will start working on a new programme early next year and it would be good to have a conversation with this committee about that. I am already receiving a lot of representations concerning schools that were not included in the current five-year programme. We want to continue with the roll out of the elimination of prefabs, particularly the rented ones. It is an ongoing, rolling programme. There are some issues with planning delays and so forth and we are trying to keep on top of those.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: That is a big concern. I know of one particular school which has been allocated funding by the Department. The school has identified a site but the project is now caught up in the planning process. When that happens, schools get very nervous and are fearful that the funding will be pulled and put somewhere else. They worry that the funding will be reallocated to schools which have secured planning permission. It is an issue of enormous concern but it is probably beyond the remit of the Department of Education and Skills in terms of ---

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Well, as it happens, I held the planning brief before becoming Minister for Education and Skills and I know that the new Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government will be bringing forward proposals specifically aimed at speeding up the whole planning process. Hopefully that will assist in the context of school buildings too.

Senator Averil Power: I wish to make a brief observation on the school building programme. The European Central Bank interest rate is now down to virtually zero - it is 0.15%. With the cost of borrowing so low, this is a key time for us to be investing in infrastructure like housing and schools. I would hope that the Minister would stress that point as part of the budget negotiations. Such infrastructure should not be viewed as a cost but as an asset for the State going forward. We must invest now. We should take this opportunity to invest properly in school building and housing programmes while the cost of borrowing is so low. Such programmes also get people back to work. I am sure the Minister will make these arguments during the negotiations. The local employment generated by school building projects is very important, particularly as much of the work can be done by smaller, local firms, unlike large roads projects where the contracts are often won by very large companies which are not always Irish. School building projects tend to be done by smaller local companies and offer enormous potential in terms of creating local employment. We should really be pushing that point.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I agree and we will be making that argument. We still have the issue of whether such expenditure should be on or off the State balance sheet but I certainly intend to push the buttons Senator Power has identified and would be delighted to get support for that from across the political spectrum.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I agree with Senator Power. Was it the case that during the boom years there was not much school building going on? I know there were plenty of summer works schemes but I do not think there were many big capital programmes in the education sector because there was a shortage of engineers. Relative to the wealth of the economy at that time, there was not a large amount of school building going on.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Most of the new schools are being built to cater for changing

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demographics but there are a number of existing schools that are in need of replacement. There are a number that are in need of replacement.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I understand. I support the concept of an accelerated building programme, which the Minister would like if she got the money.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Is the list of schools on the five-year programme updated and revised on annual basis?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The five-year programme is constantly updated.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Is it added to?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is not that there are new schools added. New schools are for the next programme. The list is updated in the sense of where schools are in the programme and ensuring they are progressed.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I suggest that they are added and subtracted if schools have missed out on being in the programme. The list should not be set in stone but reviewed annually and, if necessary, schools not on the list could be added.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We are near the end of the programme and are in the last of the five years.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I know but I am talking about new schools.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We are going to work on the new ones being added.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I made the proposal at the time, not to the Minister but to the Minister's advisers.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The problem is we have limited money. Let us say one puts somebody on a five-year programme. If one wants to put somebody else on it then what does one do with the ones that are on it already? That is the dilemma with a five-year programme.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: That is a big question and I agree with the Minister.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is the difficult question.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: It is the Minister's job to make decisions.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We want, in a positive way, to start working on the next programme and ensure that schools that have missed out and need to be in-----

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I come from a local authority background and the roads programme is looked at each year. There is a five-year roads programme but year 1 is not the same as year 2, year 3, etc. Substantial revisions take place and that is the point I am making.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: In the past, from my experience, there was a lot of uncertainty around the schools building programme which people did not like. By and large, people would like to know one way or the other. There are reasons for and against changing the programme every year. Some degree of certainty is important for schools as well. It is important for them to know they will get what they want.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I am not talking about adjusting the programme and the Minister will know what is meant by the word “adjusting”.

Chairman: There have been some changes in the set-up-----

Senator Jim D'Arcy: There have.

Chairman: -----and physical stimulus money has been announced.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes.

Deputy Damien English: Additional.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: There has been extra.

Chairman: Shovel-ready projects have been given the go ahead.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: How feasible is a five-year plan when we can project demographics down the line? Perhaps we should look beyond a five-year building programme and identify areas where the student population, in ten years' time, will warrant a new post-primary school. We could have short-term, medium-term and long-term building programmes rather than just a rigid five-year programme where a school is either on or off it. An argument could be made for short, medium and long-term building programmes. I do not know if that already happens within the Department.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The analysis would be available, and is being done. However, we get a five-year capital envelope. That is the way the accounting system works and we must operate with that as it stands.

I wish to signal the following. We must deal with demographics in terms of new schools. However, a number of existing schools are in fairly bad condition and we need to look at them in the next programme as well. I would certainly like to do so.

Chairman: The only other matters to be dealt with are appropriations-in-aid and departmental administration. Do members have any questions on either? No. Any other questions? Any outstanding questions?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: It would be worthwhile, and I have raised this matter before at this committee, to have twice yearly meetings with the Minister to discuss policy and departmental areas. Such meetings would allow us to give feedback as well which is something, unfortunately, that we did not get previously. Her predecessor, Deputy Quinn, was very willing to come before the committee but there was nothing set in stone. It would be worthwhile to have meetings, particularly in view of the changes that have been made to Standing Orders which means Opposition spokespersons are lucky to ask the Minister for Education and Skills two questions every six weeks. More informal meetings would be advantageous to both sides. Perhaps the Minister will try to work such meetings into her schedule.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: That is a good idea. When a couple of issues were raised today I suggested a more detailed discussion would be very useful for all of us. I welcome the Deputy's suggestion and I shall speak to the Chairman and clerk to the committee.

Chairman: I would like to thank everybody. I thank the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy English, and all their officials for their attendance. I also thank all the members for

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their questions.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.35 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 1 October 2014.