



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview and Finance Issues:
Education Authority

5 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Clare Duffield	Education Authority
Mr Dale Hanna	Education Authority
Ms Sara Long	Education Authority
Ms Kim Scott	Education Authority
Ms Una Turbitt	Education Authority
Mr Seamus Wade	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome our Education Authority (EA) officials to the Committee. I welcome Ms Sara Long, chief executive; Mr Seamus Wade, acting director for finance and ICT; Ms Clare Duffield, director of human resources; Mr Dale Hanna, acting director for operations and estates; Ms Kim Scott, acting director for education; and Ms Una Turbitt, assistant director for children and young people's services. Thanks very much indeed for joining us in this early stage of our Committee proceedings. We have a wide range of issues to cover, and we look forward to doing that with you.

I invite officials to make a short presentation of no more than 15 minutes, and then we will be glad to give questions and take answers.

Ms Sara Long (Education Authority): Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee today, and I look forward to working with you all to address the many challenges that currently face the education sector. Before addressing some of those challenges, I want to pay tribute to the work of all our teachers, school leaders, governors, youth workers and the broad range of educational support staff who provide high-quality services to our children and young people every day. Our vision is to inspire, support and challenge all our children and young people to be the best that they can be. We can only achieve that through the multidisciplinary workforce who have such a huge impact on the lives of our children every day.

I do not intend to go through our organisational structure and the papers, etc, that were provided in your briefing paper. I will briefly outline the role of the EA and some of our financial challenges, and then, as you said, we will be happy to take more detailed questions on that.

First, by way of introduction, and as I am sure all members will be aware, EA was established in April 2015 replacing the five education and library boards and the regional staff commission as a regional authority with responsibility for the delivery of education services. We have a statutory duty to deliver and implement DE policies and to develop strategies that will help to improve the education system. We do that while working in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders and our sectoral partners in the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), the Council for Integrated Education Northern Ireland (NICIE) and the Governing Bodies Association (GBA).

The EA is the funding authority for all schools in Northern Ireland. We are also the statutory planning authority for all schools in Northern Ireland, with overall responsibility for planning sufficient education provision for all school types and phases. We are the managing authority for 522 controlled schools, and we are the implementing body for the departmental school improvement policy, Every School a Good School.

We provide support to children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), maintaining over 19,000 statements, and provide a range of support services to our schools, such as school meals and school maintenance, and we transport 90,000 children from home to school every day. We deliver a capital programme of over £77 million and have an estate of over £2 billion. The EA also has a statutory responsibility to provide youth services. Those activities support, are complementary to and are driven by the range of education-related aspects in the Programme for Government.

We are Northern Ireland's biggest employer, with over 44,000 staff, including over 8,000 teachers, 23,000 school-based staff and 13,000 non-school-based staff, such as our transport staff, our youth workers and our headquarters staff. As the employing authority for teachers in controlled schools, we are responsible for the management of teaching and principal appointments in controlled schools and for the provision of teacher professional learning across all schools.

The EA also has a statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education and the community use of school premises and to support the Department of Education in its statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium and integrated education.

I accept that there are key challenges that we need to meet, as an authority, in our service delivery, and my first-day commitment was to improve our communication with schools and the public. We have been working hard since the beginning of this year to address that matter: to improve our communications and to help restore and rebuild our relationship with our schools. Our customer services charter has been agreed, and training is under way for all our staff. The charter seeks to make our processes easier to understand and will ensure that we reflect on and respond to criticism and complaints in a timely manner.

In addition, we have sought to improve our engagement with schools, and a range of initiatives have been undertaken this year, including our Leading Together principals' conferences; our Open Conversations events with staff and school leaders across the region; and our Locality Leadership Networks development across our three localities. These initiatives have provided opportunities for senior leaders in schools to build and improve relationships with local EA officers who support and advise on our regional services.

A consistent area of feedback from the Open Conversations with school leaders that have taken place is the challenge in relation to the delivery of services for children with special educational needs. I have met directly with parents and other stakeholder organisations, and they have outlined many problems that they encounter with the process. I commissioned an audit of practice in this area, and I am currently in receipt of its findings. While this is subject to an internal process and, therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to discuss the detail of the findings, the Committee can be assured that, as an immediate first step, an improvement team has been put in place to take forward the recommendations.

Budgetary pressures in this area are significant, however, and we are acutely aware of the challenges faced by principals as resources have been affected by increased demand and a decreased budget. It is also important to note that the new SEN framework will provide additional budgetary pressures in this area.

Area planning is another key service challenge for the EA. A review of the strategic area plan has been undertaken by the strategic investment board (SIB), and officers are working with SIB to meet timescales for submitting a report to the Department. Engagement events have taken place with

CCMS and our sectoral partners, and we have also engaged with principals for their input into the review.

As a key member and chair of management side, a key priority for us has to be the conclusion of the teachers' pay settlement. Members will know that there is an agreement between management side and trade union side that not only addresses pay but involves a number of key work streams. There is a real opportunity here to move forward positively together, and I would not want that opportunity lost in the absence of a pay settlement.

We are happy to take more detailed questions on the financial pressures, but, to highlight at a high level at this stage, as I indicated, resources have been affected by increased demand and a decreased budget. The EA resource budget for 2019-2020 is just over £2 billion and approximately 99% of that is spent directly in schools or on services supporting schools, children and young people. It is estimated that, after delivering in-year savings of over £20 million, spend will exceed budget this year by approximately £30 million, and that is after our in-year allocations through the September and January monitoring rounds.

Seamus can talk through the detail, in any questions that Committee members may have. However, it is important to highlight that school deficits continue to rise, despite actions taken over a number of years by school leaders to reduce their salary bills and to curtail other school running costs. Many school leaders believe that the budgets available are insufficient and that they can do no more; and that the quality of teaching and learning offering provided to the children and young people is being affected. Many school principals have described to us as "intolerable" the increasing strain on school leaders, as they struggle, with ever-diminishing resources, to try to meet the needs of their children and the expectations of their parents. They note, particularly, the impact on their ability to meet the requirements of those with special or additional educational needs.

As members will be aware, these functions are delivered against the backdrop of a challenging financial landscape. Members will note that the Education Authority budget has reduced in real terms by £229 million since 2010-11 and, on top of this, EA has delivered savings of approximately £100 million since its establishment. The system requires additional funding and support to ensure that DE, EA, school leaders and governors can sustain the improvements that have been made in educational outcomes to date. That will enable the increasing requirements of children and young people to be addressed and will facilitate transformation to the system to ensure that it can continue to fulfil the important role that education plays in Northern Ireland's communities and in achieving Programme for Government outcomes to contribute to a vibrant economy and a healthy population.

Thank you, Chair. That concludes my opening remarks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Sara. Obviously, we wholly agree with the tribute that you have paid to our staff in the education sector. We are also acutely aware of the intolerable financial circumstances in which many of our teaching staff endeavour to serve our children and young people. We are, as the Education Authority has acknowledged, in a financial crisis of education. Can you explain to the Committee how we got to that crisis and what precise measures are being taken to move us beyond it?

Mr Seamus Wade (Education Authority): Thank you, Chair. In previous presentations, you heard about some of the financial challenges that have got us here. Effectively, the school spend predominantly consists of payroll spend. Typically, schools spend about 80% of their funding on staff costs. The sector has not had pay inflation rises over the last four or five years. Whilst schools have taken many measures to try to restrict the impact, those measures and the lack of funding over the last number of years is really starting to bite.

Similarly, in the services that it provides to support schools, about 80% of the Education Authority's costs are staffing costs. In the absence of inflationary uplifts to pay costs, that issue is having a very significant impact on schools and on the Education Authority's ability to support schools. Members will also be aware, from previous conversations, of the increasing demands that we have on our services, particularly around the needs of children in our schools with special and additional educational needs.

Effectively, those are the primary reasons why we find ourselves in the very challenging circumstances that we are in today.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What precise measures can EA take? What level of investment do you assess as being required to move us beyond what is being described as a "crisis" and an "intolerable" situation?

Mr Wade: At the Education Authority, we have sought to use all possible means to avoid cuts having to be applied at school level. We have done everything we can to protect the services we provide to our children and young people: that is our absolute priority. Over the last four or five years, since the establishment of the Education Authority, we have secured savings of £100 million from our core budgets.

At school level, our finance teams work very closely with schools, on an annual basis, as part of their financial planning process. Schools have been working with us to try to establish whether there are efficiencies or reductions in costs that they can make without severely impacting on the outcomes for children and young people. We have over 1,000 schools. We meet those schools in the run-up to the start of the new financial year. We have a process for prioritising which of them require the most intense support and challenge, in some cases.

Schools have been working very closely with us to look at, potentially, some of the measures that other schools, which do not find themselves in quite the same difficult circumstances, have been able to implement. Many school leaders, as Sara highlighted, find themselves in the position where they have full enrolment numbers; they have reduced their support staff at school level; they have made teacher redundancies where possible; they, effectively, meet the remaining Department sustainable schools criteria; and yet their financial position is steadily worsening. Schools that might have had surpluses in previous years are finding that the surpluses are diminishing rapidly, and they are projecting that they are going to move in to deficit.

Schools are working very closely with us. Our local management of schools teams offer the opportunity to meet every single school. We prioritise our support, which is cross-directorate and incorporates input from our finance team and, importantly, the school development service. We want to be absolutely clear that, as our financial position becomes more challenging, we work with schools to ensure that the decisions that they make are sustainable from a curriculum perspective and an outcomes perspective.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am keen to bring members in, but, before that, I want to ask one key question about the seriousness of the situation. The former Education Authority CEO said, two years ago, that, without radical investment and radical reform, our education system could be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century. Is that an analysis with which you agree, Sara?

Ms Long: It is certainly unaffordable, Chair, at this point. Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. What levels of radical investment and what type of radical reform does the Education Authority propose?

Ms Long: In terms of radical investment, it is our assessment that it would take somewhere in the region of £400 million to continue to sustain the service as it is and to enable schools to operate efficiently and effectively. In terms of radical reform, we are part of the DE transformation programme. However, we have been undertaking that over the last number of years in the absence of being able to make policy change, and it is important that that programme is accelerated now so that some key policy decisions can be made around transformational change.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can you give us some examples of the type of transformations that the EA believes need to happen to help the situation?

Ms Long: Yes. We are involved in the DE transformation programme on home-to-school transport, for example. We think that a key policy decision needs to be taken forward on the future of home-to-school transport and the level of provision in it. We also believe that the 14 to 19 strategy needs to be taken forward. We need to have a radical look at our sixth-form provision, in particular, and how we work collaboratively, cross-departmentally, around that area. We also believe that we need to have a fundamental look at the model, the demand and the capacity for our early intervention services and how we may invest in those in order to not curb the demand — that is the wrong term — but better manage the demand for those services for children with special educational needs.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think that those are all issues that members will want to ask further questions on. Area planning will be another one. I will bring members in at this point.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Sara and Seamus. We addressed all of what you outlined there, Seamus, last week with the Department when the officials were here, as you will know. The financial position that we are in, after many years of austerity, is accepted. All of us in the room meet and discuss issues with principals who, as you described, Seamus, are doing everything that they can on paper but are still not able to live within their budget; they are still going in to deficit. It is definitely now at a stage at which it needs to be addressed. It has been recognised by both Governments and all the parties and is included in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

We are in February, moving into new budgets and all of that. Schools will be asking, and this is something that we put to the Department last week, whether the Department is working with the EA on plans to move towards sustainable core budgets, particularly by September 2020? We are at the stage where we need to be doing that, but we also have to look at the investment, which we will come on to as we have the discussion, that is needed in all our areas.

To pick up on some of the stuff around transformation and caution: Sara, obviously we will work through the work streams, but I would be very wary of stripping away provision. At times, suggestions are made but there are not a lot of savings in them. This has to be about achieving the best educational outcomes and having the best education service that we can provide. There needs to be investment. This should not just be about taking stuff off. Whilst transport does need to be reviewed, it needs to be improved too, as well as early years and the 14 to 19 strategy. We look forward to working closely with you on that.

You mentioned the special educational needs audit in your report, and you said that there will be an improvement team. We need sight of that audit. I have been in contact with you from March last year — 11 months — to raise specific issues and concerns. I understand that this is probably a complex area, but, at some stage, we need to know a timeline for when we will see the audit and when we will get an update on it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you want to respond?

Ms Long: OK. Yes, Karen; it absolutely would be appropriate for you to see it. It just will not be at this point in time, but I will provide you and the Committee with an update on when it can come forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When did the Education Authority's audit of SEN administration commence, Sara?

Ms Long: September.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Do you have an expected date for completion?

Ms Long: It is completed, and the recommendations are with me. So, the issue is about getting a timeline for sharing it with the Committee, which I will come back to the Committee on.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So you do not have a proposed date for when the recommendations will be made available to the Committee?

Ms Long: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is something that you can provide to us as soon as possible, then. Karen, are you content for now?

Ms Mullan: On the sustainable core school budgets, have you any information from the Department on when schools are likely to see the increase that they need?

Mr Wade: The planning phase for the forthcoming financial year has started in the Education Authority. The starting point for that has to be validation of the census data that has been received from schools, because, as members may be aware, the funding that schools receive is based on the common funding scheme, particularly the common funding formula. The common funding formula has criteria that determine funding for each school. It is largely based on pupil numbers, but it is adjusted

for targeting social need, premises size, split sites and a range of other factors. That is a substantial exercise. That information has been submitted by the schools, and it has been subject to review by the Department's statistical team and has come back to the Education Authority for validation; for example, against our free school meals database.

That work was recently completed, which allows the Department to move forward with the initial indicative budgets for schools. That begins a process where we meet the 1,000 schools to look at their plans for the next three years. We understand that, however efficient the schools might manage to be over the next three years in comparison with their colleagues and however efficient we can be with the resources that we have to support schools, we simply do not have enough money. Nonetheless, it is incumbent on us to demonstrate that we are making the best use of what we have. To answer your question, we have looked at the financial position. As the financial director, I do not believe that the position is fixable within one financial year. It needs a more holistic review of the model of service delivery, and Sara mentioned the capacity and demand against that. Fundamentally, it will probably need some decisions at government level on what the Northern Ireland public sector wants to spend its money on, and I understand that those are difficult decisions.

We have been working closely with the Department on the three- to five-year plan for bringing schools and the sector on to a stable and sustainable financial footing. That work will kick off in earnest. It will tie in with the policy discussions and reviews that are already ongoing. You will be aware that decisions and evidence-based analysis of that nature will take quite a bit of time.

So, we will do what we can in the current financial year. We will continue to work with the Department and lobby for more resource. We believe that we will need bridging funding to sustain schools during the period within which we carry out that important analysis. I have no doubt that we will have many more conversations with yourselves about what that looks like and what *[Interruption.] [Inaudible.]*

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Seamus. I understand that until the budgets are set, we will find out even for ourselves going through this process over the next couple of weeks, but it is a question that schools are asking us a lot. It is just to hear the plan, so thank you very much for that update.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for the presentation. Just before I ask the question, the papers that have been presented to us state:

"The Education Authority has made available a draft, incomplete and unaudited copy of its 2018-19 Annual Report and Accounts".

Why is it incomplete and unaudited at this stage?

Mr Wade: The position now is that the audit has recently completed. It came through our audit and risk assurance committee in January. The accounts have been endorsed and came through our board meeting at the beginning of February, so we are waiting for the Northern Ireland Audit Office imminently to certify the accounts. I guess there has been no delay on the Education Authority side. This is the timeline that was established and set out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and we have complied with that fully.

Mr Humphrey: So, this is the norm, then?

Mr Wade: Yes. Just to update: there is a process under way to ensure that there is a faster closing of accounts in future. We are working with the Audit Office on that timeline, but, at this point, that is a timeline that has been set by the Audit Office for the audit and certification, and we are in compliance with that at this point.

Mr Humphrey: I imagine that if the audit had been completed earlier, it would help you with your work for the incoming year on years, as you set out earlier.

In terms of transportation, Sara, you mentioned that you moved 90,000 young people a day to school. I did ask the question last week: in terms of your fleet, it indicates that the Education Authority buys the vehicles and therefore pays for the maintenance of those vehicles. If that is the case, which I think was confirmed at the Committee last week, has the authority looked at the possibility of leasing vehicles as well in providing efficiencies?

Mr Dale Hanna (Education Authority): Yes. At the moment, all our vehicles are purchased. We run a fleet of 825 buses. In the past few days, we submitted a business case to the value of circa £50 million for the replacement of those vehicles, and one of the options explored in that business case is the potential to lease vehicles. The leasing of vehicles, though, is a recurring cost, so in the business case the preferred option is to continue to purchase vehicles.

Mr Humphrey: The £50 million will not replace your entire fleet, presumably, so that is recurring as well.

Mr Hanna: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Humphrey: I do think that is something that should be looked at.

You mentioned the use of school buildings and facilities. Given the financial position in which the state finds itself, with money being tight, I think that it is important that regional government, local government, universities, private clubs and so on sweat their assets, whether they be buildings or pitches. What work have you been doing, and what work do you intend to do, with local government and councils to do just that?

Ms Long: We have done significant work across all the local council areas to make sure that any of the assets that we use can be joint or shared, but I will ask Kim to pick up a bit more on that and the community use of schools and the shared education programmes as well.

Ms Kim Scott (Education Authority): We have a statutory duty to facilitate community use of schools, so we look at how we can open schools with existing pitches to the community. We are also working with councils to look at, if a school needs a new pitch and a council needs sports facilities, how we can work together. There are some examples of how we have managed to do that. We are also statutory partners across the 11 community planning partnerships, so, within that, we also talk to our statutory partners and to councils about how we can make best use of our facilities in schools.

Mr Humphrey: I made that point to the chief executive and directors of my local council, which is Belfast City Council. It is hugely important for the taxpayer and ratepayer because they are the same people. At the end of the day, if we can get efficiencies and economies of scale where no one has their own estate of pitches or buildings and get a joined-up use when they cease being school buildings at whatever time of the day, and they then can be used by the wider general public.

Finally, on area planning, I can only speak of my own area, but it does not happen quickly enough. That then means that there needs to be investment, replacement, redevelopment and refurbishment of schools. For example, an area plan for primary-school education in greater Shankill has been talked about for some time and nothing has been done. Last week, I mentioned Glenwood. You have been to Glenwood with me and seen the state of the building. There needs to be more progression on those things to speed up area planning, because it is hugely frustrating and difficult for teachers to work in some of the buildings, and members expressed views on that at a meeting last week.

In our constituencies, they are doing a great job, and some of them are working in conditions that are simply no longer fit for purpose. Can I just ask that some impetus be put into the area plan to allow that redevelopment or replacement to happen?

Ms Scott: Absolutely. One of the issues of area planning is the idea that we need to plan for an area and not for individual schools. We need to ensure that the community is working with us and has an opportunity to have its say on what its schooling should look like. All that takes time, so we are trying to balance the needs and wants of the community and the school buildings, but, ultimately, what is in the best interests educationally for the children.

It is time-consuming, and what we have endeavoured to do in this strategic plan is to ensure that all our sectoral partners work together with us to agree what is in the best interests of children for a particular area. That is time-consuming as well, but I assure you that we are aware of some of the frustrations around the timescales and that we work alongside our partners to try to improve the timing where we can. We will continue to do that as we move through the current strategy.

As Sara mentioned, the area-planning review is under way, and one of the areas that we will look at in that review is the timescales that an area-plan process takes.

Mr Humphrey: As long as the review does not prolong the timescales.

Ms Scott: Yes. Absolutely.

Ms Long: The other thing to add to that, William, is that we fully recognise the need to plan the capital programme alongside the area-planning process and to better join those two processes up so that what you describe does not take place and the capital development associated with area planning can be in place.

Mr Newton: Chair, just before I go to my question, I just want to pick up on William's. Elmgrove and Avoniel have been a bit of a disaster, have they not?

Ms Scott: I am not in a position to talk about individual schools at the moment, but I can come back to you with information on any individual schools that you wish to ask about.

Mr Newton: I appreciate that, and I am sure that you would as well, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. As we mentioned, we will endeavour to keep our specific cases channelled through specific means, but the area planning and amalgamation of those two schools is extremely important to us as constituency MLAs. We are keen to hear an update on that process. As you and William said, Robin, it is indicative of some of the wider challenges to area planning, and we are keen to hear more about that. I will be happy to bring you back in at that point, Robin.

Mr Newton: I will leave that one, Chair; maybe you can come back to us on that.

We all realise the significance and the very wide brief of the Education Authority. Chair, I am sure you intend to bring aspects of it back to the table as we move through the next number of months.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes.

Mr Newton: I thank Sara and her team for coming along today. We often talk about the cost of education; I prefer to talk about investment in education. The importance of education as a bedrock for society, families, communities, the economy — everything that comprises society — has been stated widely before.

I have a relatively simple question, Chair, but relatively simple questions tend to become very complex. We formed the Education Authority to provide savings that would release money for direct education. As Mr Wade said, it is a payroll budget. There were a number of projected savings through the amalgamation of the education and library boards into the Education Authority. What are the actual savings on an annual basis?

Ms Long: There are not many of us here who were part of the amalgamation of the five education and library boards; it was some time ago. We have the original business case for it, and we will be able to provide you with that information, but we do not have it with us today.

Mr Newton: It is disappointing that that figure cannot be immediately put on the table.

Ms Long: We have made £100 million worth of savings since our commencement, as I outlined in our presentation, but I do not know what that means versus the previous running costs.

Mr Newton: Sorry, can you run that figure of £100 million past me again? How is that comprised?

Mr Wade: There were a number of areas, but, effectively, we sought to protect schools from the impact of this. We have done a few things: we have reduced our staffing numbers; we have tried to cut back on costs wherever possible from the central budget that we hold to support schools; and we have sought to make the best use of the funds from an accounting perspective in that we have worked with schools to ensure that any stock of consumables or equipment that have not been capitalised at school level are accounted for, and that qualifies as a reduction in expenditure in the first year in which schools count that stock.

Those are the main areas where we have tried to reduce the cost.

Mr Newton: That has amounted to £100 million of savings since the formation of the Education Authority.

Mr Wade: Yes.

Mr Newton: However, we do not know what the savings have been on the formation of the Education Authority vis-à-vis the five education and library boards.

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Newton: Chair, it might be useful if we —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Establish that.

Mr Newton: — establish that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I agree. Members are content. If it is possible to give us more detailed information in that regard, perhaps we can raise that directly with the Minister and the Department. It is a critical question in an assessment of whether the aims of the establishment of the Education Authority have been achieved. Robin, do you want to ask any other questions at this stage, or are you content?

Mr Newton: No, Chair. If we can establish that, it might lead to other questions at a later date. Chair, you have already agreed that this will be an ongoing discussion, and perhaps we will delve a bit deeper into aspects of it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Area panning is a prime example of a case that we would like to have a more detailed session in relation to, and that is scheduled in our forward work programme. Indeed, I have a couple of other questions that I would like to ask in relation to it, but I am keen to bring other members in at this point.

Mr Butler: My apologies for having to leave the room. It was not you; it was me. Chair, forgive me if these questions were asked in my absence.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will keep you right. Go ahead.

Mr Butler: OK, good. The first question relates to work stream 2 and area planning. You said that you are working with SIB to complete the review. How much and what level of local, pupil-focused engagement has there been with head teachers, not individually but in a collegiate approach? Is there a mechanism for that? How has it been captured?

Ms Scott: As Sara outlined, we are engaging with our school leaders as part of the review. We ran three educational leadership conferences prior to Christmas. One of the workshops at the conferences was specifically around engaging with school leaders on the area-planning review. We invited all school leaders to come along to that. We ran three workshops across three of our main localities in the EA. We then worked collectively through some of the issues that school leaders were presenting to us from their experiences with area planning and with the overall strategy, the sustainable schools policy. That has been captured across the three conferences.

Mr Butler: To finish that one, has the parental voice been captured? Is that captured through the same forum with school leaders, or is there a —?

Ms Scott: There has not been a separate forum for capturing the parental voice. However, when the school leaders have talked to us, they have talked about their experiences of the whole process, including the consultation processes that we have with parents in the schools as we go through the area-planning process.

Mr Butler: Thank you. On work stream 3, I was interested to read about the use of digital technology for admissions. Has there been any investigation into how you might use technology to simplify the statementing process or even the review process? There is a substantial bill for the review; I think it is £6 million a year. Statementing takes up a significant part of the budget. A lot of that will come down to

handling queries from elected representatives, parents or teachers and, obviously, there is a human resource issue in respect of the paperwork. Has anything been done on how we could make better use of technology? There are a number of benefits of it in terms of openness, transparency, and the ease of submitting evidence.

Ms Long: Yes, work has been done on that. We have received funding from the SBRI to progress that work. It is in its infancy, but that work is being progressed through the SBRI funding stream.

Mr Butler: I am not ashamed to ask this: what is SBRI?

Ms Long: Small Business Research Initiative.

Mr Hanna: Small Business Research Initiative.

Mr Butler: Thank you. Finally, I go back to parental voice. We know that a review is ongoing into the issues faced with the statementing process. How will parental voices be captured in anything that is developed?

Ms Long: One of the early discussions that we have had at this point is that we would become involved in the Local Government Association's peer review process. The parental voice is key and integral to that, and that would involve a very focused and structured way to capture a large number of parental voices. At this point in time, we rely on our own existing forums, feedback, complaints mechanisms and meetings with stakeholder groups, but that would become a much more structured way forward as part of the peer review.

Mr Butler: Is there a timeline as to when that would fit in?

Ms Long: April to June.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How is the voice of the child and the young person included in these processes?

Ms Long: There is a range of forums and mechanisms through which we do that. There is probably not a single, structured voice of the child at this point, in that we do not have a young persons' forum or any particular young persons' committee, but it is something that we will be taking forward as part of that work.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I want to move on to special educational needs (SEN), and I will bring members in to ask questions in a moment. What is the statutory period for a SEN assessment to be conducted and for a statement to be provided?

Ms Long: Twenty-six weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What percentage of applications for assessments are beyond 26 weeks?

Ms Una Turbitt (Education Authority): We are working through that at the moment. We are aware that a significant number of statements are not being progressed within the 26 weeks. At this point, we are working through those that are in the system and are over the 26 weeks to understand what the level of that gap is, how we shorten it, and how we put preventative measures in and make the statementing process more efficient.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We would welcome and expect that. Do you have a rough idea of the percentage of assessments that go beyond the 26-week time limit?

Ms Long: Yes, a high proportion of statements goes beyond the process, and there are a number of reasons for that. There is also the ability to apply a valid exemption to the statementing process. That is part of the work that we want to do to understand how, while there may be a valid exemption applied, we can shorten the period of that exemption as well. We need to look at it in a more holistic way.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What would that high percentage be? Approximately how many?

Ms Long: It is difficult for us to assess that at this stage because of some of the systems that we have in place and also because of the use of the valid exemptions. I would not like to give you a figure here today, but Karen has talked about information that needs to come back to the Committee, and it will form part of that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you know the percentage of applications that are beyond the 26 weeks?

Ms Long: Not specifically; it is somewhere in the region of 80%.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How concerned is the Education Authority about the extent of that percentage?

Ms Long: Extremely.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have you managed to establish any reasons or causes as to why such a concerning percentage of assessments is taking longer than the statutory aim?

Ms Long: That is exactly the piece of work that we are doing now. The improvement team that has been put in place will work with staff in order to understand where the delays in the process are, why the delays take place, where there are valid exemptions, can they, in any way, be shortened and reduced and how we can make the process run in a much more streamlined way.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is the timescale for the outcome of that review?

Ms Long: The review is complete, as I said. At this point, it is about the work of the improvement team to make immediate changes where we can, and then to bring back to you some of those more short- to medium-term changes to the process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Do you have any idea when the improvement team will be able to report to the Committee on that work?

Ms Long: Yes. I would say within the next number of months.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We will seek clarity on that. Do you want to ask a supplementary question, Robbie?

Mr Butler: I have a brief question, Chair, if you do not mind. The £6 million for the annual review caught my eye. Is it possible that that forms part of the blockage or that something in the annual review mechanism is not of value? Is it possible that that may be hindering the ability to apply the statutory period and deal with SEN assessments within 26 weeks? Is that something that will be picked up in the review?

Ms Long: Yes. It will be picked up. Our staff have a number of deadlines that they have to meet. They are constantly having to meet numerous deadlines. Deadlines perhaps could be more systematically applied. It will certainly form part of the analysis and review, but I have not formed a view on that yet.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is the impact of the high percentage of assessments being delayed beyond what is the statutory aim for children and young people with potential special educational needs? Early intervention is set as a key aim for special educational needs. Can you give us an idea of the level and type of impact that the delay is likely to be having on early intervention and educational outcomes for children and young people with potential special educational needs?

Ms Turbitt: It is fair to say that late intervention is going to have an impact on the outcome for children and their experience in school. It also puts pressure on families. There is a lot of stress associated with it. The impact is also felt by teachers in the classroom, and they are clearly telling us that we need to be more efficient in how we get the process completed. That work is ongoing, and its objective is to improve the experience of children and that of the whole class.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is important to acknowledge the impact on teachers. As MLAs, we are frequently contacted about the lack of access to support, particularly educational psychology. An extremely small number of sessions with an educational psychologist are available. Is that level of access being responded to as well?

Ms Long: That is why we believe that this piece of work is so important. It is not to help run the administrative process in its own right but to determine what the delays in the process mean for children. That is absolutely why it is so important and of such concern to us. It is not the process in its own right but the impact that it has on children.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What will the Education Authority's input into the proposed new special educational needs framework look like?

Ms Long: We have been working closely with our colleagues in DE on the framework. We have provided our commentary and have been involved closely with DE in moving the framework forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): There was a consultation on the early years special educational needs framework. That consultation included issues in which our predecessor Committee had taken a strong interest. Those issues included a reduction in the number special educational needs nursery hours. Is there a timescale for when the Committee might receive an analysis of the consultation responses that you received? Is there a timescale for the introduction of the new early years framework?

Ms Long: We can have a report back to the Committee to include in your work programme, if that would be helpful.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When did the consultation on the early years SEN framework close?

Ms Long: I do not know.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): My recollection is that it was quite some time ago. A timely report on the analysis of that consultation report would be appreciated by the Committee.

The Education Authority was considering a new model of delivery for special schools across Northern Ireland, and this was responded to most acutely in Belfast. Is there any update on that?

Ms Scott: I will pick up on that. The area-planning portfolio for special schools is now sitting temporarily within the education directorate. I am therefore dealing with how we are going to move that forward and accelerate the processes. I have already been in touch with some of the principals of the special schools in Belfast to look at how we can hopefully begin to move the process forward within the coming weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think that the Education Authority had an issue that enhanced consultation on the process with parents. Is that ongoing?

Ms Scott: The process, to my knowledge, has begun, but I am not sure about the detail on how much has started. However, I will be looking at it as part of moving the whole agenda forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have one final issue to raise about special educational needs, after which I will bring in other members.

I imagine that the Education Authority is aware of a few extremely concerning instances of the inappropriate use of seclusion and restraint. Perhaps it is aware of Scotland's move to introduce new legislative guidelines on the appropriate use of seclusion and restraint. Can the Education Authority update the Committee on its work on the matter?

Ms Turbitt: Yes. We have been working with colleagues in the Department of Education and looking at that as a policy issue. It is an important area that is being taken very seriously, particularly for those children who are vulnerable because of their mobility.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you think that new legislative guidelines are necessary and that they will be introduced in Northern Ireland?

Ms Turbitt: There should be a policy and guidance for staff on the use of restraint.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is certainly something that we will follow up with you.

Mr McNulty: You are all very welcome. Thank you very much for your presentation, and thank you for engaging with me so positively over the past number of years when this place was closed and for being so helpful on so many fronts.

The Education Authority's interim strategic plan states that its vision is:

"To inspire, support and challenge all our Children and Young People to be the best that they can be."

That is a very positive vision. I am sorry, but I am going to take a bit of a helicopter view here, and then I am going to do a deep dive. Your strategic priorities are:

"Meeting the LEARNING needs of our children and young people; Providing EXCELLENT education support services; Developing ALL OUR PEOPLE to carry out their jobs successfully; Managing our RESOURCES effectively and efficiently; NURTURING LEADERSHIP across the EA to give clear direction in a dynamic and complex environment."

I love your vision and I love your strategic priorities. To what extent are you being enabled through funding to support and achieve your strategic priorities?

Ms Long: I outlined the challenges faced earlier, so you will know that funding is one of the single biggest constraints that we have in being able to achieve fully the vision that we set out for ourselves. That does not mean that our vision is not what drives us every day to provide and deliver our services and to do what we do. However, we recognise that, in a constrained and challenging financial environment, our ability to fully achieve them, all the time, is somewhat curtailed.

Mr McNulty: What has been the impact of this place being closed for three years on your ability to meet your strategic priorities and on the morale of your teachers and teams?

Ms Long: We have continued over the past three years to drive forward as best we can all the changes that are required. As I said at the outset, there are key policy decisions that we would like to see taken forward now. We would welcome that happening, as it would support us. Those key policy decisions alone will not deliver all our priorities, but they will certainly support us in doing so.

Mr McNulty: There has been a lot of discussion already about SEN, and I appreciate the challenge that SEN provides for you, given the number of children presenting with special educational needs. Is that not something that should be celebrated, in that education is so much more bespoke now? It is oriented to the individual child instead of one monogamous group. That is how it was in our time, when we were all considered to be the same. I know that that places an extraordinary burden on the system, teaching staff, children and parents, but should it not be celebrated that education is now more focused and child-specific?

Ms Scott: Absolutely. In the Education Authority, we put the child at the centre of everything that we do. That is how we move forward with everything, whether it be special educational needs provision, looking at provision for gifted and talented children or looking at how we can improve educational outcomes in a school. It is therefore something that we strive to do with everything, every day, yes.

Mr McNulty: Can you explain why the percentage of pupils who achieve the expected level at Key Stage 1 seems to be on a downward trend across maths, English and IT?

Ms Scott: Assessment for each of the Key Stages has been severely impacted on by the current action short of a strike across all our schools. The rate of return of Key Stage assessments to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has been very low. The figures have had to be adjusted to take account of the impact of the low return rates.

Everybody in the system would agree that, until we get a more robust way in which to assess at each Key Stage so that the system can understand the progress of children across literacy and across communication using maths and ICT, those figures on how children are progressing are questionable.

We are in a difficult period. We are not across what each of the Key Stage assessments currently looks like right across all our schools.

Mr McNulty: Explain to me why the trend is downward.

Ms Scott: The number of schools submitting returns to CCEA is very low, so we need to take a look at the fact that we do not understand what the level is across those three areas in all our schools. Yes, on the face of it, the figures will look as though there is a slight decrease, but we need to take account of the fact that only a small sample size has been returned. I am not saying that that may not then be indicative of what the system is. What I am saying is that, as things stand at present, because of where we are with our assessment issue, we are not able to provide a good enough assessment of the progress of children at each Key Stage.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Perhaps now is a timely opportunity to ask how urgent it is for fair pay and conditions to be agreed and delivered. Would you like an opportunity to speak on that?

Ms Long: Yes. Absolutely. As I said at the outset, we have an opportunity now. We have an agreed deal between management side and trade union side. We are no longer in negotiation. We have an agreed pay deal. It is not just a pay deal. There are a number of work streams associated with it that really will enable us to take forward quite transformative measures across the education sector. We are working closely with trade union side on the development of a transition plan for how we move from the current state to the new state. We are also working hard on what those work streams might look like and what work stream preparedness we can expect. We have a window of opportunity. It would be awful if we lost that window. I am not sure how we would gain back the ground achieved if we were to lose it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have you had any indication from Ministers on progress made to secure the finance to deliver that settlement?

Ms Long: No. We have had no recent update. Your update is probably more recent than ours. What we do know is that the business case is with the Department of Finance. It is there, but we have had no update on anything further.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you for your briefing and for answering our questions this morning. My first question relates to communication. We have raised the matter before. It is still the case that we, as MLAs, and our office staff have to contact senior management in the EA directly on special educational needs issues. That does not happen with any other department.

Ms Long: Yes, Karen has raised that issue with me in the past. As I said, one of my first day-one commitments was around enhancing and improving our communications. That is something we are committed to doing, and we have a number of pieces of work ongoing. We will look into that specific issue.

Ms Turbitt: It is also fair to say that, with the improvement process that we are taking forward, we also need to look at how we communicate with children, families and other interested parties.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you. In Omagh in West Tyrone, where I live, local primary school Christ the King has a lot of children who have moved from Syria and are availing themselves of the education support programme that is in place. Does anyone have an update how the education support programme is working across the North? Is it effective?

Ms Turbitt: We have an intercultural education service that takes responsibility for supporting schools with newcomers, Travellers and Syrian refugees. The service works as part of an inter-agency process, so it is working with colleagues in health, housing and other areas to support families to help them settle. We are happy to get you more information, but our sense is that, in the main, the programme is working well. Newcomer children in our schools are doing well when it comes to educational attainment, but that is dependent on the support that they get in the school and in their communities.

We are aware that some families have moved to other locations. For example, they may have originally settled in, for example, Strabane or Omagh. However, particularly if they have children with

medical issues, they tend to move towards the Belfast area, where the regional hospital is. Support has been put in place for those families, and that is working well.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Deputy Chair, do you want to come back in?

Ms Mullan: Yes. I will do so after William.

Mr Humphrey: On the issue of communication, I have met the north Belfast and greater Shankill principals' group. You may be aware of principals' frustration with the EA and their difficulties in getting information or an effective response from the EA within a decent time frame. What steps are you taking to address that issue? Indeed, do you share that view?

Ms Clare Duffield (Education Authority): I will take that question, Chair. We have developed a customer charter. At the end of the day, we are a service-delivery organisation, and, in that respect, school leaders are our customers. We need to ensure that we are responding to them in a timely manner, that they know what the next steps are, that they understand our services and that they know who to contact easily.

We have therefore developed a customer charter that sets out expectations for our staff on timeliness when responding to phone calls and emails. It sets out what customers can expect from our services and the behaviours that they can expect from the people whom they deal with. It also looks at what is helpful for us to gain from whomever those customers are so that we can answer the query or deal with the issue effectively, efficiently and in a timely fashion.

From the start of January — this will run until April — we have been training our office-based staff, in our five offices, on the customer charter and our expectations through delivering a specific customer-service training initiative. We hope that we will be able to share externally the commitments that the charter makes from April onwards.

We developed the charter in conjunction with school leaders, and it is very much based on their feedback. Last year, we conducted a survey with school leaders about better communication, and we have a range of other work streams under way to improve communication through a variety of channels.

Mr Humphrey: Was the customer charter established just in January of this year?

Ms Duffield: We have been sharing it with our staff from January so that we can be very clear about the standards that we expect. It covers how quickly phone calls should be responded to, timescales for replying to emails and the types of behaviours expected of staff. Therefore, to answer your question, yes. We are training staff now.

Mr Humphrey: It is therefore too early to know whether the service has improved. When will you review it?

Ms Duffield: We hope to have some baseline information. We monitor complaints and the feedback that we get, and that gives us a bit of a baseline. We will be doing that on an ongoing basis through normal management arrangements. We hope that our colleagues hold each other accountable for meeting those standards.

Mr Humphrey: As Committee members, we have all articulated our concerns on mental health, suicide awareness and the general well-being of young people. There needs to be a greater joined-up approach across government and among Departments, the EA, arm's-length bodies such as the Public Health Agency (PHA), councils and so on. What more can the EA do to address those huge issues in schools?

I have spoken to principals who are having to use front-line money that is meant for educational provision. When you distil everything, the amount of money that principals have to spend on books, equipment or whatever becomes very small in the context of a huge school with a huge budget. Using some of that budget to buy in the professional services of counsellors reduces the budget further, which, in turn, reduces the amount of money available for front-line delivery of education. What more can be done?

Ms Turbitt: We are very conscious of the increasing demand to tackle our young people's mental health. We need to approach that on a number of different levels. First, there is the universal level. What are we doing for all children in schools so that they learn to look after their own mental health from a very early stage? That is where early intervention or prevention needs to happen. Therefore, work needs to be done there.

The Nurture programme that is being piloted on how we support schools to embed the nurture principles in primary schools is important and something that we would like to take forward. We also need to look at the groups of children with particular needs and at how we target interventions at them. We have groups of children who have social, emotional and behavioural issues. Although we try to manage behaviour, we also need to understand their behaviour. We are working with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI), as key members of the body, looking at trauma-informed practice initiatives and at how we can understand children better in order to support their need. That is about noticing when children are in distress and intervening early, as opposed to managing them, suspending them or reacting in other ways when we do not have the necessary level of understanding.

We also have services such as the critical incident response team (CIRT), which ensures that there is a team available to support schools to help them through what can be challenging times, by which I mean pupil death, including by suicide, parental suicide and other serious issues.

Mr Humphrey: Is there sufficient joined-upness?

Ms Turbitt: I would like to see more joined-upness. There are opportunities to work with our colleagues, particularly those in Health.

Mr Humphrey: Who takes the lead on that?

Ms Turbitt: For trauma-informed practice, the SBNI has been given the lead role. We already work with the Public Health Agency. There are more opportunities available, but, again, it is about having the time and resource and about making sure that we have the structures in place that allow us to do that.

Mr Humphrey: I accept that. My point is that, if everyone around the table brings their shared experience, knowledge and resource, efficiencies may well be achieved. That is not to say that we should be looking at achieving efficiencies in this area, but if people combine their resource, be it people, experience or money, perhaps we will get a more effective outcome.

Ms Long: We would support that, William. Arlene Kee has just entered the Public Gallery. She will speak with you later about our youth service and the key role that it plays.

Ms Mullan: I want to come back in on the discussion that we had on statements. We are all extremely concerned, and some of us have had that conversation with you, Sara, and with others in your team, and so have the Children's Commissioner and the Children's Law Centre. They have been very vocal on it, and I would like to see you working more closely with them. As I have informed you before, even within my team, my office manager has had training through the Children's Law Centre on a number of occasions to be able to provide that support to parents. So it is taking too long. My question is looking for detail. Can you provide the Committee with a detailed list of young people who have a statement who are on a reduced timetable? I have asked for some of that information in the past and we have not got it, but maybe now that we are in Committee we can get that. It is alarming that we do not have the figures here today of the numbers of statements and the delays, but I know that the Children's Law Centre has those, so if I could get those, I would appreciate it.

Sara, just on procurement, the strategic review was carried out. Has that been concluded?

Mr Hanna: I can pick that up, Karen. We are very close to finishing that. We had a number of recommendations and actions to complete against that. I have a meeting this week to discuss the timeline for getting re-accreditation. We anticipate going for re-accreditation probably in May/June.

Ms Mullan: I am not sure if it is you, Dale, but I sent an email yesterday requesting a meeting. The changes to work experience arrangements have just come to my attention in the last number of weeks. I do not have my head all around it, but I would appreciate a meeting, and it may be something

that the Committee might pick up. Whilst I welcome the improvements to ensure that pupil and employee safety comes first, why have the new arrangements come about?

Ms Scott: I will pick up on that. Previously, with the five education and library boards, schools had to submit a lot of paperwork to the boards. We had to sign off to say, "Yes, we agree where the young person is going to go on placement." That then went back to the school, and then the young person was allowed to go on placement. It was very bureaucratic, it was very time-intensive for our officers, and, naturally, it was taking away the autonomy from the schools to make their decisions as to where the young people should go on work experience. So it was absolutely right that we reviewed our guidance around work experience so that schools were able to take the lead on that but also be protected in what they can and cannot do around work experience.

We have put the guidance in place. We have written to schools to say, "This is not something that we expect you to do tomorrow or next week, but you can begin to work towards the new recommendations in the guidance to protect and support you and to support the young person on their work experience". We will continue to work with schools on how they can implement the guidance that we have produced.

Ms Mullan: Right, Kim, there is definitely a miscommunication here, big time. I will give an example. In my constituency, this has already started to happen. The only children this term attending work experience placements are from grammar schools. The non-selective schools have had to put a halt to it. They have told me that it is due to the increase in paperwork, and a number of small to medium-sized businesses in the city have said that they will no longer be able to take those young people. As I said, we need to have a meeting on this. I have the paperwork on those children, and also children from the special school will not be able to attend work placement.

In the 14-to-19-year-old strategy, we were looking at breaking down barriers and opening up opportunities. For young people from my community, it is very important that they get out to as many and as wide a range of employers as there is, because the fact is that their opportunities are limited. We have a number of large companies in the city that are willing to go through the process because they have large HR departments. Also, we have a broker who is funded through the Department of Education who is very restricted in their work, and that is having a detrimental impact. Even for me, as a politician who takes young people on work experience, I have looked at the paperwork, and we will have to make a judgement on it. It is not something that I want to do, because we take quite a number of young people in, and it is great and I see them all coming up here. One of the things will be that I probably cannot bring them up here. I ask that you step in and stall it for the minute and take the time to consult properly on it.

Ms Scott: Thank you for that feedback, Karen. We have been receiving feedback, and hence we wrote to all school leaders to suggest that. We said that they should continue with their own arrangements and that we can come back and look at the implementation. I would absolutely welcome a meeting, and we can pick that up again.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think I have a pupil coming for work experience next week.

Ms Mullan: Check the paperwork.

Mr Humphrey: I have two.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We could do with urgent feedback and clarification on that. I totally agree with the Deputy Chair. I think work experience is invaluable in education and career pathways. We will need clarification on those matters, and we will endeavour to communicate that through our own various networks in order to maintain support for it.

Robbie and Justin are still to come back in.

Mr Butler: I see that Arlene Kee is in the room, and she may flesh this out a bit further, but I think that you guys are well positioned to look at this. It is roughly what William and Karen were talking about, but two slightly different topics. One is the work that we need to do on mental health and suicide prevention, and the next bit is about the lifelong learning piece and work experience.

Without prejudicing our forward work plan, I would be surprised, given the values that we all hold regarding the provision of mental health, if you did not hear a lot more from us on this over the next two years of this mandate. You gave us some great information around nurture and nutrition in early years and trauma-informed practice, but they are two distinct elements because one is prevention and one is intervention. Our focus going forward, and certainly the energy that I will be bringing, will be very much focused on the preventative piece too and making sure that we are not just trying to plug the dam but are actually doing something about that.

This is only my opinion; it would not be that of the Committee: the big gap is in the curriculum. The big gap is that we are evaluating our children and measuring their school performance strictly on academic performance. It is not your fault; it is the way that we have developed as a society. I do feel that our curriculum is stretched to the point where very little value, if any, is put on the non-academic side. There is no mandatory piece, so I imagine that whatever way it is written in is the way that it is interpreted. Are you mindful of that and open to the wider discussion with the Department and us on developing a curriculum that integrates, particularly, the preventative piece? I know that there is a consultation out on nutrition, and we know about food poverty and those types of things, and nurture in the early years, which is good. So there is some good developed practice at the moment, but I am keen to hear your thoughts on building something into the curriculum in a collegiate approach, because I do not think that teachers should be, perhaps, the delivery model for that.

Ms Scott: Thanks, Robbie. One of the real benefits of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum when it was introduced in 2006 was the flexibility on how teachers could shape the curriculum. There are two statutory areas that do encompass mental health and well-being in the curriculum. In the primary curriculum, it sits under personal development and mutual understanding (PDMU). Right throughout Foundation, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, there are areas of the curriculum that need to be covered in and around personal development, including resilience, emotional health and well-being and so on, which absolutely is where we build the foundations for our children.

In the post-primary curriculum, at Key Stage 3, we also have a statutory curriculum for personal development. It sits under the umbrella of learning for life and work, and, again, resources that were developed at that stage when the new curriculum came in, called Insync, were developed in partnership with psychologists, social workers, health workers and educationalists. There is a real rich variety of resources and curriculum there for schoolteachers. As you said, the issue is how we value those aspects of the curriculum, and what is not assessed is sometimes not valued as much. So it is about how we can bring those areas more to the fore and decide how we can put more of a value around that, because the curriculum does not stipulate the amount of time that each teacher spends in each subject area. Therefore, it is about raising awareness around how we begin to value those more and bring those more to the fore, but they are there in our curriculum as it stands.

Mr Butler: Just one more point.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Briefly.

Mr Butler: Yes. Justin was talking very passionately about the reduction in physical education, and we do have a rising epidemic of obesity in children. Is that definitely in there as one of the values that we measure?

Ms Scott: Absolutely.

Mr McNulty: I very much second the points you raised, Robbie. Thank you very for that.

I want to raise a constituency issue. Lisnally Special School in Armagh is extraordinarily popular and has grown in recent years. Most importantly, it provides a very good education. Accommodation is completely cramped and overcrowded. Have you considered a new build there?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will have to ration it to one local issue a week per MLA at this rate. Widen it to a wider matter if you can.

Mr Hanna: Justin, we are scoping out the feasibility of a school enhancement programme for the school, up to the value of £4 million. Our teams are doing that and are very close to finalising it and submitting a business case. I am happy to pick that up in a bit more detail. I will write to you, if you want me to do that.

Mr McNulty: OK, thanks. I appreciate that, Dale. I recognise that you might not be able to any this question now, but what is the backlog in schools maintenance in terms of time and money? I understand that the cost of maintenance is skyrocketing. What is the Education Authority doing to bring that under control? Do rising costs mean that less work is being done and that long backlogs are being built up? Can you give us an update on the appointment of contractors that carry out the maintenance?

Mr Hanna: OK. I can pick up some of those points; I will not be able to pick up them all. The current backlog is in the region of £400 million across the whole system. I do not have that broken down by category or sector.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Just for maintenance?

Mr Hanna: Just for maintenance. I will go on to talk about what we consider to be critical maintenance, and some of that might be for things like decoration. We carry out yearly suitability surveys in the schools. We put those all together in the system and it comes up with a figure of £400 million. We would probably consider about £90 million of that to be critical.

This year, we have spent about £25 million on maintenance across the system, and that has worked out at about 1,600 schemes, Justin. Some of it is about whether there is sufficient capacity in the system to do more, but there is also a need for additional funding to do more maintenance.

Mr McNulty: Earlier, Robbie mentioned the importance of physical activity in developing kids' physical and mental health and their ability to learn. What are the Education Authority's thoughts on the cuts that have led to the removal of programmes that were having such a positive effect and impact on kids? How can that be made up by your actions?

Ms Scott: I think that that goes back to the earlier conversation about our finances and how we have endeavoured — rightly so — to put those into front-line teaching and to protect it as much as we can. As a result of that, other initiatives, earmarked programmes and so on have often not continued.

Physical education is part of the statutory curriculum and is an entitlement for every single child. Again, it goes back to how much we value the amount of physical education in the curriculum and how we can continue to work with teachers to ensure that children get as much physical activity as possible, and also, when it comes to extracurricular activities, how we can ensure that as many children as possible can engage in extracurricular physical activities, in as an inclusive way as possible. It is about how much we value that and working along with schools to promote it more.

Mr McNulty: OK. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The guideline amount of time for PE per week is not being met in our schools.

Ms Scott: I do not know the details of that, Chris, but I would surmise that, with a fairly cramped curriculum, there is a lot of competing subjects for teachers to cover.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We can come back to that. I want to pick up on a few points that members raised before we bring the session to a close.

The maintenance backlog was referred to, Dale: £400 million. That is not far off the total pressure on Education in Northern Ireland. What is the real day-to-day impact on our schools and pupils with that level of backlog? How long will it take to clear it?

Mr Hanna: I cannot answer the first question. I would need to go away and consider that, but, on the timescale —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You must have some idea. OK, the latter question. OK.

Mr Hanna: Yes, the latter question. On the impact, for example, we are looking at outdated heating systems in schools, electrical upgrading or maybe roof repairs. There is no doubt that the fabric of the building is likely to have an impact, but I cannot give you an exact assessment of the scale of the impact on a child on a day-to-day basis. All I can say is that if the heating fails, certainly it has an

impact as it may lead to a school closure in the wintertime. It can have a real impact on a day-to-day basis.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In your opinion, what is the overall state of our schools estate in that context?

Ms Long: Mixed. I would say we have a mixed school estate in that we have some very new, fit-for-purpose, modern buildings which are new builds. We also have the school enhancement project, which has the ability to make considerable impact to a school without requiring a major works programme, but we also have a number of schools where the fabric of the building is in poor repair. William raised the point earlier that part of the maintenance backlog will include, for example, schools which are in an area planning scenario. If the future of the school is in jeopardy, or there is a question about it, the level of investment will perhaps be lower than if they were not in an area planning scenario. Therefore, while there will always be emergency works, and we will always keep the school to a certain level, the schools with the longest maintenance backlog usually have an area planning question mark around them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think we need to probe the matter further when time allows us. What amount of buildings do we have that are not fit for purpose in Northern Ireland?

Ms Long: They are all safe. They are all subjected to emergency maintenance and the things we need to do from a health and safety or disability access perspective. The buildings are all safe. Fit for purpose is, as Dale described, part of the suitability survey where we assess our buildings against the handbook and what they should be like if they were running as they ought to be.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What percentage of our buildings meet that standard?

Ms Long: I do not know.

Mr Hanna: We will have to come back with a specific figure.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, that will be good. It seems fairly essential. In relation to the procurement issue that has been raised, why are school leaders consistently telling elected representatives that they believe they could procure works, maintenance services and equipment more effectively and at better value than the Education Authority?

Mr Hanna: The works that you refer to are actually a significant piece of work that the Education Authority has been undertaking over the last two to three years. We have spent quite a lot of time engaging with principals on the matter, whenever we meet them, it is a matter they also raise with us, and we appreciate that it is an extremely serious issue for them. As we currently stand, at the end of January, we have issued new tender documents to the market. We have engaged extensively with the market, and, if the procurement process goes through that proper timeline, we hope to have a new contract in place for all of Northern Ireland which we hope will include better value for all schools.

We have worked very hard to drive down costs. For example, one of the things that schools talk about and leaders talk about is painting their premises. We have built efficiencies into the new contract around painting, and we will have a standardised price which will apply across all of Northern Ireland. We have tried to be innovative and bring back some direct labour. Where you have small-value jobs, we are going to employ our own staff rather than bring in a contractor. For want of a better phrase, we are going to use a man in a van, and we will go out and do the jobs for the schools ourselves. We hope to provide better value. All I can say is that work has just concluded and is out to tender at the moment. We anticipate that the new contracts will be in place for the start of the new school year in September 2020.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. You have a wide range of stark challenges, and area planning seems to be one of the key levers you have for reform, which was touched on earlier. Is it possible to remind the Committee of the threshold for sustainable schools in Northern Ireland?

Ms Scott: In terms of the six criteria for sustainable schools policy?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, the criteria and the numerical thresholds.

Ms Scott: The sustainable schools policy is from 2009 and outlines six main criteria through which schools can be judged on sustainability. It is not that we say, "Oh, a school is five out of six or four out of six, so therefore it is in line for closure or whatever". It is very much taken in the round and considered against the indicators that sit across those six criteria. There are criteria around the strength of links to the local community, the educational experience of the pupils, the enrolments, the financial position, the school leadership and the accessibility of the school. Those are the criteria that we look at in the round on the sustainability of schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How many schools in Northern Ireland are short of the sustainability criteria?

Ms Scott: Again, we cannot say four out of six or five out of six means they are not sustainable. What we can say is we can use some of the thresholds that Minister Weir, when he was Minister of Education, set in place and that are listed in the sustainable schools policy.

We have 813 primary schools. One hundred and five pupils is the minimum for rural and 140 for urban. At the moment, we have 258 schools below that threshold in primary and 555 above it. For post-primary, we have 196 schools. What has been set down under the sustainable schools policy is that in years 8 to 12 there should be a minimum of 500 pupils, and for post-16, which includes lower and upper sixth, there should be a minimum of 100 pupils. Our statistics show that 72 schools are below the threshold for years 8 to 12 in terms of the 500 enrolment, and 46 below the threshold for 100 in post-16.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is your assessment of that total number of schools that are below those thresholds?

Ms Scott: We are working for all of the schools, particularly the primary schools, in terms of the composite classes. If there are two or more year groups, those are the schools that we have been focusing on, and also the sixth form. Our issue and our assessment is around what we refer to as strategically important small schools. We absolutely need some direction on what the definition of that is so that we cannot use an arbitrary figure to say, "Actually, because you are below this threshold, it means that you are on the area plan for potential amalgamation or closure", because there are so many other factors at play.

So, yes, there is a lot more work to be done on that, but we also need to work with our Department colleagues to begin to look at, for example, the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the strategically important small schools and lots of other community issues that will play into considerations in and around area planning as we move forward.

That is why we welcome the review, and as part of that review the Department is also going to be looking at the sustainable schools policy and how we address some of those issues through that. That is very welcome from the EA's perspective.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is approximately 376 schools that do not meet that threshold.

Ms Scott: That is the figure when we are looking at just the enrolment figures, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What progress has been made towards addressing sustainability of school factors or, indeed, reducing the number of schools that do not meet those criteria?

Ms Scott: The current strategy is 2017-2020, although we have extended this current action plan for another year. We have published a number of development proposals. In 2017-18, for example, we published 30 development proposals, in 2018-19 we published 24, and to date in 2019-2020 we have published 20.

Just because a school is within an action plan does not mean that it is automatically going to result in a published development proposal, because that would pre-empt a decision on a process that we need to undertake around area planning, but those are the figures that we have to date on how we are progressing area planning.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is since 2017.

Ms Scott: Yes, since the start of the strategy.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, those are published development proposals. How many outcomes have been achieved? How many changes have been delivered? They are published development proposals; they are not concluded development proposals. How many development proposals have been concluded since 2017?

Ms Scott: When they are published, they go to the Department for consideration. I do not have the exact figures on how many the Department has agreed from that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Significantly fewer than the amount that has been published?

Ms Scott: I cannot say the exact numbers offhand, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It seems likely that a small number of development proposals have been concluded since 2017, compared with the significant number of schools that have sustainability criteria factors to be examined. Is that fair to say?

Ms Scott: Without a Minister, it has been difficult. Once we publish, it is over to the Department of Education to begin its statutory objection period, which is a minimum of eight weeks. After that, there is a decision. In the absence of a Minister, the permanent secretary has been taking decisions on some of those development proposals. That is the process for moving it through.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a process that requires acceleration. Can you specify ways in which you foresee it being accelerated?

Ms Scott: Yes, absolutely. Although we are saying that area planning should be accelerated, the main issue is the voice for the community. If we can find a way of doing a lot of community engagement in the early stages, before it becomes an individual issue that we are then consulting on, it would speed up the buy-in process in terms of what we need to do. There is no doubt that resourcing is another issue. The EA has a small team working on area planning. We work very closely with our sectoral partners, and we work with CCMS, but an increased resource, from our perspective, would certainly speed up the process. Incentivising the process is another way in which we could speed up area planning. I would welcome another session in which we could go into the area planning —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Definitely, yes.

Ms Scott: — in more detail.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Ulster University community conversation tool appeared to be a useful intervention in community consultation. Is that fair to say?

Ms Scott: Yes. We piloted a few programmes in and around that, and we would be interested in looking at that and at how we could develop it and take it further.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I realise time is upon us. Justin, you have a final supplementary.

Mr McNulty: It is a quick one, Chair. Sometimes you get your words mixed up. The word I meant to use earlier was "homogeneous", not "monogamous" *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a helpful clarification.

Mr McNulty: Thank you very much. "Homogeneous" is the word.

Mr Humphrey: For the benefit of the tape.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): For the benefit of Hansard.

Officials, thank you for your time today. As you rightly acknowledge, there are matters that we will need to return to in more detail. The challenges are stark; they will require ministerial and political

leadership, but there are key areas where we need decisive Education Authority leadership. We have touched on many of them, such as teachers' pay, school budgets, area planning, SEN provision, educational attainment and others. There are issues that we will need you to come back on in more detail and issues on which I am not entirely convinced everyone will be assured, given the responses that have been given today. We are committed to working with you on those issues to try to ensure that that level of investment, reform and leadership is achieved.

Ms Long: Thank you.