



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Special Educational Needs Assessment and
Statementing Audit: Education Authority

4 March 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 Maurice Bradley
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Donna Allen	Education Authority
Ms Cynthia Currie	Education Authority
Ms Sara Long	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome the witnesses from the Education Authority (EA): chief executive, Sara Long; assistant director for pupil services and procurement, Ms Donna Allen; and head of transformation, Ms Cynthia Currie.

For many years, the Committee for Education has received and expressed profound concerns about the Education Authority's special educational needs (SEN) provision. That includes the complexity and delay of the SEN statementing process and, therefore, access to SEN support for children and young people in Northern Ireland and, indeed, their families. It includes the way in which Belfast special school area planning was handled; instances of non-verbal children with special educational needs being left behind on EA transport; excessive journey times for EA transport; lateness to school; and even children being dropped off to the wrong address. I personally submitted to the Minister of Education a petition signed by over 6,000 parents and guardians in opposition to the attempt by the Education Authority's children and young people's services to reduce SEN nursery hours to part-time provision. The Education Committee has had extreme concerns about those matters.

I remind us all, as was mentioned in our pre-meeting, that our guiding responsibility is to deliver openness, transparency and answers for children in Northern Ireland with special educational needs, their parents and guardians and the teaching and non-teaching staff who work to support them. We welcome your presence and look forward to working to secure that outcome for children with special educational needs.

Ms Sara Long (Education Authority): Thank you, Chair. First, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before it to discuss the findings of our audit of practice in special education and,

specifically, the current statutory assessment process. From speaking to parents, children and principals since I was appointed chief executive in April 2019, I know that the statutory assessment and statementing journey is a critical process for all involved. It is a highly complex area but one where it is essential that the processes exist to meet the needs of individual children at all times.

As the audit report found, however, that has not always been the case. We have identified significant shortcomings in how the Education Authority managed the process. I want to share those findings with the Committee, detail the recommendations and demonstrate that measures already implemented are having a positive impact on those who have been waiting too long for the statementing process to be completed. It is my intention to provide the full report to the Committee at the appropriate time, and I understand the Committee's frustration that I am unable to do so today. However, we have provided a briefing document, and I can outline the salient findings and recommendations. We are also happy to return to the Committee to discuss the full report.

Much of the work that my colleagues do at EA is excellent. We are committed to creating an organisation that is focused on putting the needs of children to the fore of everything that we do. That undertaking to change is already under way. Since I became chief executive, we have been delivering across a range of work streams: for example, leading together with school principals through locality leadership networks; improving communications; the introduction of a new health and well-being strategy; coaching programmes for principals; and the introduction of an online admissions process for parents and schools. However, as the findings of the audit demonstrate, we have fallen short of the high standards that we set for ourselves and that children and families deserve, particularly in respect of the current statutory assessment process for special educational needs. It has left too many children waiting too long for the process to complete.

From a strategic perspective, the report has identified a number of issues relating to information governance, compliance with time frames and unnecessary and undue delays in the statutory assessment process. My colleague Donna Allen, who led the audit and is the assistant director of pupil services and procurement with responsibility for business improvement, will detail the audit's key findings and the actions that EA is already taking to urgently address those shortcomings.

The audit of practice found that 85% of pupils did not complete the statementing process within the 26-week statutory period. That meant that, at the time of the analysis in November 2019, over 1,000 children had exceeded the statutory time frame. I want to make it clear that those delays are unacceptable. They have caused distress and worry for families and have delayed the provision of appropriate services to children with special educational needs. On behalf of the Education Authority, I apologise to the families affected and assure them that measures are under way to address the problem.

In response to the report, my colleague Cynthia Currie, a seconded school principal, is leading a dedicated improvement team. Cynthia can address any questions that you have on those improvements. The key actions include focusing resources on the children who have been waiting longest, identifying reasons for the delay and expediting the process. We are committed to the creation of a more child-centred service. There is still some way to go, but good progress is being made. Since November, there has been a 36% reduction in the number of children who have been waiting beyond 26 weeks.

When I was appointed chief executive in April 2019, the Education Authority's children and young people's services launched a special education transformation action plan. When term began in 2019, however, I commissioned this audit to provide an independent overview of how the statementing process was being delivered and to assess performance. I pay credit to my colleagues, who have worked extremely hard to provide good practice in challenging circumstances. However, the current system has not delivered because of poor process on EA's behalf and because there has not been a culture of proactively managing statutory assessments. Changing that culture requires a systematic change in focus towards robust management and accountability throughout every stage of the statementing process. I am sorry that that has not been the case, but, through the implementation of the report's recommendations, we are making practical changes that are beginning to deliver improvements.

As chief executive, I want to work with the Committee, the Department and the Minister to deliver on our strategic priorities. We do so across the majority of our services, but I acknowledge that there are challenges ahead in this area. Changing culture and process cannot be achieved overnight, but we have started. I make a commitment to the Committee to update it in due course on the targets that we

will set for ourselves and on our ongoing progress against those targets. I will ask Donna, the author of the report, to describe some of the main findings and recommendations to you.

Ms Donna Allen (Education Authority): It might be helpful to the Committee for me to talk, first, about the team that led the work. When the chief executive asked us to do this work in September 2019, I formed a team. As Sara said, I am the assistant director responsible for continuous improvement in the Education Authority. I have considerable experience. My background is in leading improvements and service improvements — particularly in health, where I was an assistant director for seven years — targeted at improving statutory time frames. The team that I formed had a wide range of skills for carrying out an effective audit. It comprised members with expertise in process and system redesign, digital transformation, information governance, management information, the use of management information to drive service development and service development in the children and young people's services directorate.

As the chief executive outlined, we were asked to carry out an audit of the current administrative practices associated with the statutory statementing process in the Education Authority. The key areas that we were to look at were information governance; compliance with time frames, particularly the commencement of time frames; and any unnecessary and undue delay. As the chief executive said, children and young people's services already had a special education transformation action plan. We were asked to review its effectiveness and determine whether it was having the desired impact in improving the process for children and young people.

There were a number of key findings. The current statutory assessment process was highly manual and administrative, and there appeared to be unnecessary and undue delays in the operation of this process across all SEN teams in the authority, albeit to varying degrees. There was found to be a lack of management focus or accountability on the importance of the 26-week statutory assessment time frame. That appeared to be driven by the perception that the achievement of that time frame was not possible. Therefore, cases were often managed in a reactive manner, rather than proactively, in order to meet the timescales for children. The audit team found that the interpretation and handling of valid exceptions, which are in the legislation, was a key factor in this area. The legislation contains seven valid exceptions, ranging from schools being closed for a period and, therefore, Education Authority staff being unable to correspond with them to move statements on to a child being out of the country. However, as a team, we found that valid exceptions, once applied, did not seem to be managed in a proactive manner.

Routine standardised management information reports were not systematically and routinely produced for use by senior management to monitor operational performance or drive improvements. Consequently, senior management did not have a comprehensive overview of which children in their respective offices were waiting longest for the completion of their statutory assessment.

The audit team was informed that there is now consistency in the practice around the formal clock start of the statutory assessment time frame. However, we found evidence that that had not been the case previously. There was uncertainty about the time taken for the provision of support for children that is specified in their statement. That may be due to late referrals to the transport department or delays in the implementation of classroom assistant resource. That timeline is not currently monitored, which, the audit team felt, may result in further, hidden delays, once the statement had been issued.

The authority operates a statutory assessment panel, which is part of phase 1 of the statementing process. It is where decisions are made on whether a child should proceed to the statementing process. Each office appeared to operate in a silo, with limited evidence of cooperation or sharing of good practice across the five offices. The audit team had concerns about the operation of the statutory assessment panel and some of its decisions. Issues relating to the performance, functionality and reliability of our Capita One system, which is our main management information system, impacted on staff and their ability to effectively operate the statementing process. The accommodation provided for some of the teams was not appropriate for information governance.

The audit team found areas of good practice linked to a number of offices, but we felt that that could be attributed more to individual staff working to the best of their ability in challenging circumstances than to evidence of proactive and effective management. The team recognised that staff felt that they were working to the best of their ability, often in difficult and demanding circumstances, when dealing with challenging and emotive requests and queries from parents, public representatives and/or legal challenges. The team found that the majority of such queries and requests appeared to be due to the delay in the current statementing process.

Following those findings, the audit team compiled 10 recommendations. They include a change in culture so that the service moves to much more proactive and rigorous management of the statementing process; a new EA-wide model to include greater accountability and monitoring of performance; a review of our Capita One management information system, putting robust management around that; a review of the current staffing structure, given some unnecessary and undue delays; and a review of implementation and how we, as an authority, implement valid exceptions. We have recommended that decisions of the statutory assessment panel and district tribunal are reviewed in depth and that learning is taken from those. We need further cross-directorate working between special education services, transport, human resources and other areas in the authority. We need to review our existing accommodation with regard to information governance and our records management and file storage arrangements. Our final recommendation is that the authority learn from the lessons in the audit and that we transfer them to other services.

Following the recommendations — Sara alluded to this, and Cynthia will go into it in more detail — a comprehensive and robust improvement plan that covers all our recommendations and has a number of work streams has been produced.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Will Cynthia speak to those?

Ms Cynthia Currie (Education Authority): Yes, I will pick up on Donna's point about the 10 recommendations. Since the audit of practice, we have put together a comprehensive action plan. It has a series of work streams, each with a work stream lead. I lead the team to action the plans. I am a seconded school principal. My background might be of interest to the Committee. I have been teaching for 25 years and am currently a principal in post-primary, non-selective education. During that time, I have worked with many young people — and their families — with special educational needs and significant barriers to learning. It is essential that any improvements take into account that we must be a more front-facing service. We must provide assurances and build the trust of communities and, indeed, the children, young people, schools and families.

With that in mind, the immediate actions in the action plan focused on children as individuals. Our first action in the past number of weeks, during which we have been working with staff around the offices, has been to look at each individual case. Our focus has been on those that have been open longest. We understand that it can be a difficult process for young people to go through. For some children, it has been a prolonged process. We have been hearing the stories and looking at the cases of each of those young people. We have been trying to understand what the undue delays were in each case, trying to expedite the process and trying to ensure that we remove any barriers to the conclusion of the statementing process for those young people. We have made some improvements. We have been focusing on those outside the 26-week framework, but that is not to the detriment of those now entering the statementing process. For each office, we have a member of staff who is dedicated to looking at the backlog of the longest-open cases, but that does not take away from business as usual in the offices.

We have also been working alongside staff to look at staff capacity, and I endorse what Donna said about our hard-working front-line staff, who face tremendous challenges. As a team, we found an openness to improvement and a real commitment by staff to work with us on reviewing the processes. There is no doubt that we have had to and will look at accountability in each office and across offices. We are looking at the processes so that we can further streamline the work that staff undertake currently in each office.

The improvement plan will also include longer-term improvements, such as partnership working with other services and proactively seeking feedback from children, young people and their families. It is a highly administrative process, so we are considering how digitalisation might help staff further. We are also looking at performance across the Education Authority as a whole and at some of the learning points emerging from the audit of practice in this service.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): As the officials have nothing to add, I will summarise some of those findings: unnecessary and undue delay in the EA assessment and statementing of support for children with special educational needs; a lack of management focus and accountability; a lack of managerial performance monitoring; limited evidence of management meetings; incorrect interpretation of valid exception reasons for delay; failure to accurately record assessment timescales and the time taken to provide support for children with special educational needs; delayed provision of appropriate transport and classroom assistant support; information governance issues, risking the integrity of highly sensitive information held about children with special educational needs; and some good practice

attributable to individual staff working in challenging circumstances but no proactive, effective management.

Education has been chronically under-resourced in recent years, and the type of reform necessary to respond to that has been absent. However, the findings of the audit of the Education Authority's SEN assessment and support process are shocking. They also confirm the profound and long-held concerns of parents of children with special educational needs across Northern Ireland and, indeed, the concerns of the Education Committee. The findings present, for whatever reason — that is what we have to establish — the development of a culture of delay, non-compliance and lack of accountability and, perhaps most importantly, a systemic failure of children with special educational needs by the Education Authority. Is that a fair assessment?

Ms Long: They are very serious findings, and I take them very seriously. As I said in my opening statement, I absolutely confirm that the services that we deliver have fallen short of what children and young people should expect from them. The audit identified, as you outlined, a number of systemic issues, and we want to move forward to address those and improve.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Of most concern is how such a culture and systemic failure was allowed to develop.

Ms Long: It is a complex process, and it is difficult to make an assessment now of what happened in the past. We are clear that, moving forward, it will become a child-centred service. It is easy to see this as an administrative process, but it is not. Some of the feedback that I have heard directly from parents and school principals certainly supports that perception. It is a process that is in place to support children and their families to access the services that they need. It is important that we move forward on that and change to a very child-centred approach.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is the response of the Education Authority board, as the executive committee responsible for the governance and accountability of the Education Authority, and its children and young people's services subcommittee to the systemic failure of children with special educational needs?

Ms Long: The Education Authority board has been informed of the report's findings and recommendations, as have this Committee and the children and young people's services committee. They are seeking urgent updates from us on the impact of the improvements. They are fully committed to the full implementation of the recommendations and, moving forward, to demonstrating — not just describing — that we are improving the process and making it more child-centred.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is the culture of mismanagement, delay and systemic failure in the EA confined to the area of special educational needs?

Ms Long: The audit was undertaken in that specific area, and that was on the basis of the feedback that we had received about it. I cannot say that every service across the EA operates to its maximum efficiency and effectiveness, but I can say that I do not receive the same level of feedback across other services as I do on this one.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is a full, independent review of the Education Authority required to restore public confidence in your organisation?

Ms Long: We are in the process of developing our performance management framework and arrangements that will come forward through our board and through which we will be able to easily and clearly identify the issues. We have had a focus on the structures of education for a long time, and, moving forward, I would like us to focus on the services that we provide to children and young people, the standard to which we provide them and the quality to which we provide them. The audit shows that the Education Authority can hold and is holding itself to account and is coming forward with its own recommendations. That is a start, and we will demonstrate improvement against the recommendations. That should help to restore confidence in the authority.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I have just a few more questions before I bring in Members. The findings refer to serious information governance risks. Have there been GDPR breaches? If so, has the Information Commissioner been informed?

Ms Allen: This is an area, as you all know, in which we deal with a high volume of personal information. In a service of that size and scale, there will, at times, be information governance breaches. Any serious breach that we are aware of will be reported if we believe that it is serious enough to warrant being reported to the Information Commissioner's Office.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have there been reports to the Information Commissioner's Office further to the audit?

Ms Allen: No. We have been corresponding with the Information Commissioner. We had some questions about the service, and we have been corresponding with them. We have provided them with an assurance that we have done a thorough audit of practice and have recommendations to take forward for improving any risks around information governance in this area. That has been included in the action plan and improvement plan. The Information Commissioner's Office has been assured that we have investigated and highlighted any issues that might be a risk and that we have an action plan to address those.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How many children's records were found to be incorrect?

Ms Allen: Sorry?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How many had inaccuracies?

Ms Allen: Obviously, we did not look at them all. There are 22,000 children in the system, so we did not look at them all. Some of those inaccuracies may just have been about the date of referral and the date recorded on the system. That might have been some of the inaccuracies. There were some inaccuracies in the records that we viewed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. You state that 85% of assessments, totalling 1,000 children, were beyond the statutory deadline of 26 weeks. What reasons were provided for those statutory breaches?

Ms Allen: All of the reasons and findings in the audit. There are a number of reasons. As an audit team, we found unnecessary and undue delays, and I have outlined a number of those this morning. I cannot say for what particular reason, as there were a number of systemic reasons for those delays.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How many remain outside the 26-weeks deadline, as of today?

Ms Allen: As of today, that figure has reduced to 676. There were 1,000, and that has been reduced to 676.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you have an idea of the level of delay beyond the 26 weeks?

Ms Allen: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The average length of time and the longest length of time?

Ms Allen: Yes. As Cynthia said, we and her team are looking at individual children. Every child's assessment that is over 26 weeks has been looked at in detail. Currently, our longest wait is over 100 weeks, and that has reduced considerably.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Almost two years. There are children, potentially, with special educational needs and in need of special educational needs support and early intervention waiting up to 2 years for assessment and support.

Ms Allen: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I am keen to know what the impact of that lack of support could be, but I am conscious that I need to bring other Members in. Allow me to do that, and then we can return to the detail.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Chair. I welcome the delegation coming to see us today. The Chairman has already indicated that this is just a shocking situation. There really is no other description that one can put on it. In many ways, I feel that, when I sat in my constituency office and was contacted by parents, I believed that, when you took up an issue on behalf of a child and it went into the system, those queries would be handled professionally. We now find that there was little or no professionalism attached to the work that was done. I am sure that the folk engaged in that are not going into the office to do a bad job. I am sure that they want to do a good job, but the Chair has already indicated, in that phrase that is so concerning, that there are "systemic problems" in the system. It is really appalling.

I want to be positive about this, rather than dwelling on the negative. Perhaps you could outline when, you think, the backlog — the 1,000 cases that have been reduced to 626 — will be addressed and brought into line? Will that mean that every child or as close as possible to every child entering the system will be dealt with within the 26-week period? What communication has taken place with the parents of the children affected? The phrase "child-centred service" has been used in this room: what does it actually mean in this context?

In your key findings related to the recommendations, not one recommendation is in any way complex. They are fairly simple and should have been the culture in any performance monitoring role of a person in the Education Authority. I am just worried about when we will see the matter put to bed.

Ms Long: In Cynthia's team and the improvement team, their immediate priority has been children currently in the system who have been waiting longest in their statementing journey. Their focus has been to reduce that backlog and reduce the number of children waiting. Alongside that, the longer-term action plan is around making sure that we do not find ourselves back in this position. However, we understand that it will take time, and we appreciate and feel at this point that it may take additional resource as well. That is the work that the team is currently doing. At this time, we have not profiled our full conclusion as to when we will reach the end, but that is part of the performance improvement metrics that I have committed to bringing back to the Committee, and we will share our performance against those metrics with the Committee. There are some immediate things to attend to, some shorter-term things to attend to and some longer-term things to attend to.

Cynthia, do you want to say something about the child-centred service?

Ms Currie: Yes, absolutely. I will pick up on the point about what a "child-centred service" looks like. There are multiple aspects to that, but it is a service that begins with the child. Too often, we begin with the system and try to work it round the child. We begin with the child and work the system to that. We look at the needs of the child and their wider family. We have to get better at asking children and young people for their views. We need to get feedback in the near future from those who have been in the system on the key frustrations they found with the service and use that to find solutions for the service, going forward. It is also important for young people who come into the statementing process that there is proactive advice and guidance as to what their journey may look like. Ultimately, when a statement is issued, it is about making sure that the young person gets the provision in a timely manner and gets the right provision for their individual needs.

In my opinion, as a practitioner, it is about beginning with the child and making the systems work for the child's needs, not the other way round. That is how I intend to take improvements forward.

Mr Newton: What communications have taken place with the parents?

Ms Currie: In each case, in the same manner as statementing takes place, there is, at the end of a process, an opportunity to get back to the parents and discuss their case with them. That is what our officers are doing at the moment in their correspondence with children and their families. We also tell the parents that there is a helpline available for those who are going through the process. That is available for parents who continue to be concerned about any of the issues that have been discussed today.

Mr Newton: Are you in communication with the parents of the 626 who are still to be completed?

Ms Currie: In going through the process, there are various communications. It would be fair to say that one of the processes that has had shortcomings is communication with parents. Our service needs to be more front-facing and communicate more proactively with the parents. During the last three or four weeks that we have been involved, there has not yet been a general communication to that group.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Robin. There are important questions there. Obviously, parents and guardians of children with special educational needs across Northern Ireland will receive this shocking news today. Have you a clear message for those parents, who will be distressed by what they hear today?

Ms Long: Yes. I reiterate my opening remarks that the service we have provided has fallen short of their expectations and of the standard that we should have delivered, and I reiterate my apology for that. We are working through those cases individually and contacting parents directly on a case-by-case basis. However, as Cynthia has highlighted, a helpline is available if parents are concerned or in distress. They can contact us about their case, if we have not made individual contact with them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I just seek clarification of a point? I had, perhaps, inaccurately recorded the number of outstanding cases beyond 26 weeks as 676.

Ms Long: It is 676, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

I seek reassurance as to the adequacy of the helpline. We have had experience of helplines put in place to respond to difficult situations that exacerbated the problem, rather than helping it. Is that helpline adequately resourced? Will a parent or guardian distressed by today's news have timely access to a trained person to respond to those concerns?

Ms Long: They will, yes. We will keep that under review, however, on the basis of the volume of calls. If we need to adjust that, we will.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I am also interested in hearing the intended timescales for processing the outstanding assessment cases, but maybe another member will cover that in their questions.

Mr McCrossan: I thank Donna, Sara and Cynthia for their presentation, contribution and insight. Around this table, we have heard for months if not years from principals, teachers and parents about how let down they feel by the EA. What I have heard today is nothing short of chaotic, shocking, reckless, dysfunctional and an utter failure in terms of how EA has conducted itself in relation to something as important as children with special educational needs. It is complete maladministration that needs to be addressed with complete urgency. I know, Sara, that, since you have come into place, you are taking this seriously. I know that it is a difficult beast to handle and that it will take time, but I can tell you, from what you tell me today, that there are not just shortcomings: these children have been failed. This is not just a slight fall in standards; this is complete failure on the part of EA in the interests of those children, parents, teachers and principals. If we are to find any starting point to rectify some of the issues, that is where it should be.

To clarify, was the audit that was carried out carried out by auditors?

Ms Long: No. I think Donna outlined in her presentation the skill set of the team. It was specifically around business improvement, information governance expertise and process systems.

Mr McCrossan: Given the breakdown in trust and confidence in the Education Authority among parents, teachers and principals, I would go further and suggest that, if this is the result of an audit of SEN that was carried by the Education Authority of itself, there should be an independent review of the entire organisation, particularly after what you have just told us.

We are talking about children. I know that you appreciate the seriousness of this and the challenge of the task ahead, but I can tell you, from having spoken to principals, teachers and parents, as other members will have done, that, every time I am in a principal's office or with a teacher or a parent, the finger is firmly pointed towards Education Authority failings that they find continually.

I have noted the helpline. Teachers and principals have told me that, any time they lift the phone seeking any form of support from the Education Authority, they are often left wanting. The biggest challenge for the Education Authority seems to be around communication — the complete lack of it — outside the organisation. There is a lack of communication with schools, with principals, teachers and, in this instance, parents. That is where the big issue is.

So that we are clear in the room, who is now responsible for the statementing of children with special educational needs?

Ms Long: Responsibility for the statutory operations process now rests with Una Turbitt, and Una reports directly to me now on that issue.

Mr McCrossan: When was that appointment made?

Ms Long: It was not an appointment; it was a temporary reallocation of duties.

Mr McCrossan: OK. And for special schools?

Ms Long: Ruth Bell is responsible for special schools, reporting through the education directorate to Michele Corkey, who took up post on Monday.

Mr McCrossan: Again, is that a temporary position?

Ms Long: It is a temporary reallocation of duties.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you. I want to ask about something that you touched on, Chair, if you will give me some grace with this. Around September, news broke of the issue around date-stamping correspondence that came in about children:

"A man who claimed to have worked on the cases for two months last year told the Radio Ulster Nolan Show that he was directed not to date stamp letters as it would constrain the authority to respond within a certain time frame."

If an audit on this has been carried out, what are the findings of that audit in that regard? Was someone or some people charged with that role deliberately directed not to date stamp correspondence?

Ms Allen: That was one of the areas that we were asked to look at. I suppose the first thing that we, as an audit team, wanted to be assured of was that that was not the current practice. We have been assured and found evidence that the practice now — the practice that we observed when we were doing the audit — is that there is no manipulation of the "clock start", as we would describe it. We investigated the issue and found that, historically, there was evidence to suggest — I do not know why staff were doing that — that the date the referral was received was not the date recorded on the system. I cannot comment on why that was the case, but there is evidence that that had been the case for a number of children. We were assured that that is no longer the case, across all offices.

Mr McCrossan: I am glad to hear that it is no longer the case. My concern is why it was the case to begin with. A whistle-blower who worked on this for the EA claimed that he or she — he, in this case — was directed not to date-stamp. That is a serious situation. It also begs questions of the review that has been carried out in terms of its independence to properly get to the crux of the matter.

That is a serious situation. If we are to instil confidence in the Education Authority in relation to this, there needs to be clarity. Are we saying that the audit found that there was no direction given by anyone in a senior position — anyone, for that matter — not to date-stamp those documents?

Ms Allen: We were not able to talk to that individual, so we could not talk about that incident. We as a team were clear about, first of all, being assured that that was no longer the case. We needed to be able to assure the chief executive that that is not happening in the organisation now. What we found was evidence that suggested that that had been the practice. Why it was the practice I cannot comment, because we were not able to talk to that individual. There was evidence to show that some referrals had been date-stamped and the date recorded on that date-stamp was different from what had been previously recorded in the system.

Ms Long: We take any concerns of malpractice or any accusations in that space incredibly seriously. That is why the audit team was directed specifically to examine that allegation. A specific piece of the audit was to examine that allegation and bring forward a conclusion. Considerable attention was paid to it as part of the audit.

Mr McCrossan: Do you accept that there have been failings in that regard by the Education Authority?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I supplement that, Daniel? Is the failure to accurately date-stamp an assessment from date of referral, as part of a statutory process, an offence?

Ms Long: No, I do not think it is an offence as such. It is not an offence, no. However, we would recognise that it is not good practice and not how we would want things to be. It is one area that, the audit team was assured, had already been attended to, and it has evidence that it was being routinely done in the correct way.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Given that it is not an offence, what is the accountability mechanism in response to someone doing that?

Ms Long: That would be a line-management issue but a line-management issue that we now need to set in the context of the changes that we are making so that everyone is clear about their expectations and that there is absolute clarity around what we expect.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I ask without prejudice to any proceedings, and, if it does, do not proceed to answer, but why were you unable to talk to the individual who alleges they were directed not to date-stamp letters?

Ms Long: They did not come forward to us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): And you did not approach them.

Ms Long: They were anonymous.

Mr McCrossan: The said individual acknowledged that staff in the Department worked hard, which I have no doubt about. He also said:

"the files were very poorly organised, with many going missing and no prioritisation given to very urgent cases."

That is a shocking statement. It was revealed by a whistle-blower. I thank the whistle-blower for doing that because I would argue that the reviews, reforms or internal audits would not be taking place but for this sort of revelation from the internal workings of the Education Authority in relation to the special educational needs of children.

Ms Long: I would just like to comment that there is no doubt that there was certainly a prompt on the basis of the allegations that were made. They were extremely serious allegations, and, as an organisation, we could not or would not ignore them. There is no doubt about that. However, I would say again that, since I came into post, I have met directly with parents, school principals and others, and I have received the same feedback as you describe. Therefore, this was an important and serious area for me, as the chief executive, to examine.

Mr McCrossan: I appreciate that, and I have no doubt that you take it as seriously as we do and are just as shocked, considering you are new to the role, by some of the findings and events that took place prior to your appointment. From conversations that I have had with principals since you have come into the role, I appreciate that you are taking it seriously. I would put that firmly on the record, chief executive.

Mr Lyttle: I am eager to move this on, Daniel, if you could make a final point.

Mr McCrossan: It is important that, yes, I welcome the apology on behalf of the Education Authority, Sara, that you have put on record. I know that parents have been very stressed by the delays when waiting for their children to be statemented properly and frustrated by the revelations that have come since. It is important, going forward, that the Education Authority steps up and admits that there were major failings, not shortcomings — to me, that is insulting — "There were major failings. Children were let down. We have learned from those lessons, and we will put it right". That is a key starting point for the Education Authority if we are to build trust and confidence in the organisation again.

Mr M Bradley: It is worrying that children may be waiting almost two years without a statutory assessment. In my constituency, East Londonderry, there are 68 children waiting for assessment. It is unacceptable that those children could be denied proper education based on their special needs for that length of time. It is an abject failure by the authority that, may I add, has no reflection on you; you have only taken up the post. However, the internal audit has identified staff failing to abide by management processes. Has the EA taken measures to remedy any of those failings? I know that you have reduced the backlog by 36%: how quickly can that backlog be brought under control and brought up to date? What are the resource implications? What will the cost be? I imagine that you will have to bring in extra staff.

Ms Long: The audit was designed from the outset to identify the nature and scale of the issues that we had been receiving feedback on. That was the nature and purpose of the audit and why we are here today to describe the work to you. We are still reaching a conclusion on the work that Cynthia's team is developing around how long it will take to do this, what resource we will need to clear the backlog and, more importantly, what resource we will need to ensure that we do not find ourselves in this position again. I am happy to bring that work to the Committee when completed, but I thought that it was important not to wait for that work to be completed and to come forward today with the findings of the audit around the scale of the issues and the nature and extent of them.

Mr M Bradley: Just one other point. You have identified the need for a culture change. How quickly can that culture change be initiated?

Ms Currie: Culture change requires you to bring people along with you. One of the positives is that, when going out into the offices, we find that the staff welcome change and improvements. They have been positive in the last number of weeks that we have been working with them, and I believe that a culture change can come about more quickly when you have that. Clearly, it is the nature of a culture change that it will take time, and we will have to put time and effort into that. However, I am heartened by the fact that the staff are ready to work with us on the improvements and there is an improvement team that is committed to making sure that happens.

Mr M Bradley: You raise a vital point. If you initiate change in any organisation and can bring the staff with you, you will be on the winning side. I agree with Daniel that it may be prudent to look at undertaking a full independent review of the entire Education Authority. That is no reflection on you present here; it is just something that, I feel, may happen.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I want to build on the point about staff welcoming change. Do you have any idea why the person who brought key information to light that contributed to the urgency of the audit did not make that information known via internal channels in the Education Authority?

Ms Long: As I understand it, they had left the organisation at that stage, but, yes, the statement that I made at the time was to ask anyone who had those concerns, or the person themselves, to come forward, either anonymously, through our whistle-blowing process or otherwise. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I presume that that is a call that you would reiterate to any member of staff in the Education Authority on any issue at this stage.

Ms Long: It is, yes.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much, ladies, for your presentation. Sara, you said that there were "significant shortcomings" and that it was taking "too long" for the statementing process to be completed. Sara, you gave a figure of "over 1,000" children, while Donna said "1,000". What is the actual figure?

Ms Allen: It was 1,070.

Mr Humphrey: What makes me very concerned is that that is 1,070 children out of, you said, 22,000 children in the system at a given time.

Ms Allen: There are 22,000 children with statements.

Mr Humphrey: Yes. Is that therefore 1,070 out of 22,000?

Ms Allen: No. That was 1,070 out of the total number of statements that we are currently processing.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Some of those applications will be from children in mainstream education without diagnosed special educational needs.

Mr Humphrey: I am trying to establish the actual percentage.

Ms Currie: I can help you with that. At the time, there were 2,268 open cases, and the processing of the statements of 1,070 children was beyond the 26-week statutory period.

Mr Humphrey: Out of how many overall?

Ms Currie: There were 2,268 open cases at that particular time.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, but is that out of 22,000?

Ms Allen: No. There are 22,000 children in Northern Ireland who currently have a statement. Cynthia has quoted the figures. Those are the live statements that we have at the minute: new referrals and children going through the statementing process.

Mr Humphrey: Terms such as "change of culture" give me great cause for concern. What exactly does that mean? What was the culture that allowed this to happen?

Ms Allen: A number of the findings point to that. To summarise, there was not proactive management of cases. I talked about valid exceptions, which are legal, because they are in legislation. A valid exception could be that there was a delay in receiving health advice. We all understand that there are some delays in, say, getting an appointment with a consultant paediatrician. By way of example, we as a team found that the proactive management of a case was not as it should have been. When the information came back or there was no longer a reason for the valid exception, the case was not proactively managed but reactively managed. The case would have been looked at if, say, a parent rang in or somebody mentioned a delay. We did not find a system that was proactively managing cases.

Mr Humphrey: The word "culture" indicates to me that it is systemic and widespread in an organisation. That is not what you said in the presentation, however. You said that there were pockets of good work being done.

We have not seen the full report. Has the EA board seen it?

Ms Long: No.

Mr Humphrey: Why is that?

Ms Long: For the same reason that the Committee has not seen it: there are internal processes that need to reach a conclusion before the EA board is in a position to see the full report.

Mr Humphrey: Does the EA have an audit committee?

Ms Long: It does.

Mr Humphrey: What was it doing throughout the past number of years, when that culture was prevailing?

Ms Long: The audit committee has been briefed on the findings of the report, and its chair now has an oversight role in ensuring that improvements are put in place.

Mr Humphrey: Surely the audit committee and its chair had that role prior to this report. What was the audit committee doing? Why was it not asked to do the report? Why was Donna brought in to do it?

Ms Long: Donna was in the organisation. She, along with the rest of the team, was assigned to do the report on the basis of the skill set that she has. They were very particular pieces of work that we wanted to understand and test.

The nature of the audit was to identify the scale and nature of the areas and issues of concern on the basis of feedback that was received. Once we had the audit and were able to clearly identify the issues, that information was taken to the audit committee, and it was briefed on it.

Mr Humphrey: Donna, when you were giving evidence, you mentioned your audit team. Your audit team is not the audit —.

Ms Allen: No. It was a team that I put together to carry out the audit practice. It is not the internal —.

Mr Humphrey: Was anybody from the audit committee on it?

Ms Allen: No. Nobody from our audit team.

Mr Humphrey: Is that not a bit odd?

Ms Long: No. It was an audit that was commissioned by me, as chief executive, in response to feedback that was received and some of the allegations that were made. It was very much an executive team report that was commissioned by me rather than by the board.

Mr Humphrey: Has what has been described as a "transformation committee" been established in the EA?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: What is the transformation committee?

Ms Currie: The transformation team has been in place in the Education Authority since September/October 2018. As a team, we look at designing services for young people. Two other principals and I are on the team to provide a practitioner focus, and we have looked at the areas in which we can try to improve services going forward. We have liaised and worked very closely with the Department of Education on its transformation programme.

Mr Humphrey: You lead the team, Cynthia.

Ms Currie: Yes. I have led it since I came in.

Mr Humphrey: Is it just you and two other principals, or is its membership wider than that?

Ms Currie: It is me and two other principals. We have a programme lead on *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Humphrey: Are you directly answerable to the chief executive?

Ms Currie: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: I want to ask about the trauma that the 1,070 children and their families have been going through. You will know that I was part of a DUP delegation of MPs and MLAs that met you in the summer to raise a lot of the concerns. Those children and families have been going through a dreadful time. Some of them, shockingly, have been going through this for over two years.

You talked about the culture of the organisation. What is morale like at this time?

Ms Long: As Donna described, we have teams of people who are working very hard in very difficult circumstances. They are doing their best and doing a good job. They do not want to deliver a poor service, and it is not their intention, as someone said earlier, to come to work every day to deliver a poor service. I have no doubt that the findings of the audit have had an impact on them, but, as

Cynthia described, it is a team of people that really wants to see change, make improvements and deliver the child-centred service that we described.

Mr Humphrey: I welcome, as colleagues have welcomed, the issue being investigated. I welcome the fact that we have findings on the organisation's systemic failings, however dreadful those are. To have an internal investigation is one thing, but in order for me as a public representative, for school governors, of which I am one, for school principals, for staff and for parents to have confidence that you are delivering the very best outcome for our young people, a full independent inquiry or investigation is required.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Minister of Education and the permanent secretary have parent-body responsibility for the Education Authority. To what extent have they been briefed on the audit impact report?

Ms Long: The permanent secretary has been briefed on the audit impact report, and I understand that he has briefed the Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have they had access to the full report?

Ms Long: The permanent secretary has seen the full report.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. What has been the response of the Minister or the permanent secretary to the full report?

Ms Long: At this point, the permanent secretary and the Department wish to understand the improvements that we are planning to make and to understand the timescale around those improvements, much like the Committee does. We have committed to bringing those improvements to them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If anybody else is going to ask about valid exceptions, feel free to take the subject off me.

Mr Butler: I am.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I will leave it to Robbie. I am keen that we draw out what the eight valid exceptions are and to what extent each exception played a key role in the delays. Was there one particular exception over others etc? I will not follow up on that now. I will leave it for another member to come in on.

Ms C Kelly: Today will be an extremely frustrating day for a lot of families. The most vulnerable children in our society have been left behind by the very organisation that is there to support them in education. Every week, at least one family comes to my office, desperate for support for their children in school. I am sure that other members have the same experience. Those families are constantly firefighting, with us alongside them.

Despite the obvious consequences for children and families when a statement is delayed, are there any other practical consequences for the Education Authority when statutory time frames are exceeded? Given the fact that staff's view was that the statutory time frame was unachievable, what does that mean for plans to reduce the statementing time frame?

Ms Long: As I said, the audit was designed to allow me as the chief executive, and us as an organisation, to understand the full nature and scale of the issues, based on the feedback that you have described. That is what we want to do. I am determined that we will move away from the situation that you described of constant firefighting, constant lobbying and constant representation to enable children to move through what is a statutory assessment process. Moving away from that is part of what the audit was designed to do. You are right. As I said at the outset, it would be easy to see this as an administrative process. It is not an administrative process. It is a process that allows children and their families to access the right and appropriate support services for children, and we are determined that that is what it will become.

Ms C Kelly: There are obvious issues with IT systems, as cited in the report. How will the use of IT systems be streamlined and made more effective?

Ms Allen: We currently have a legacy system, Capita One. We know that it needs to be significantly modernised. One of the recommendations in the report is to review the functionality of the Capita One system and also to appoint a system manager. We need expertise around some of the IT systems to manage them adequately.

Another issue, as Sara said, is that the process is highly administrative and highly manual. We work on paper, we post etc. We are working on the digitisation of some of those manual processes. A considerable part of the work stream involves looking at how we digitise some of the processes to make them much faster and much more effective. That is a key component. One member of the team leads on digital transformation; in fact, that is one of the reasons that he is on the team. We are leading on the work to use IT and digitisation to improve some of the manual processes to make them quicker and more effective.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Sara, Donna and Cynthia for coming before the Committee. I appreciate that the circumstances are difficult. We can all sense your determination to put things right, so I put on record my appreciation. That having been said, there is an overwhelming feeling of sadness in the room — almost a weight of despair — that we can all sense, because young people who are the most vulnerable in society have been failed. That is appalling and tragic.

I want to talk about cultural change, which a number of members have mentioned already. "Culture" may be an abstract or airy-fairy concept, but, ultimately, culture is the way in which things are done around here. The EA's mission is:

"to provide a high quality education for every child."

Its values are:

"openness, respect, reflection, responsibility, excellence, equality."

To what extent has the Education Authority lived up to its mission and values?

Ms Long: Justin, I say at the outset that one of the key elements of the terms of reference of the audit of practice undertaken was to ensure that they were anchored to the EA values and that we could test the processes against our EA values. Do you want to say more about that, Donna?

Ms Allen: Yes. As a team, we are very committed to the values. They were central to our work. One value is excellence, so, when we looked at systems and processes, we did not say that they were OK; rather, we measured them against the best, asking, "What should an excellent process look like?". Responsibility is a key value, so we asked who had responsibility for the operation of something on a day-to-day basis and whether everything was in place. Respect for children, their parents and staff is also a key value.

All of the values were interwoven with the terms of reference and also with the improvement plan. It is about having excellent services. We are not trying to fix the situation. We are trying to improve it so that no child waits longer than he or she should or than is necessary. Those are our values, along with openness and transparency. The audit team worked very closely with staff on the ground. We were very open with staff about what we found. We have also been very supportive of them and will help them to make improvements. That is the work that is being led by Cynthia.

Mr McNulty: I only but expect you to seek to live up to those values. My question was this: to what extent has the Education Authority lived by them? From what we have heard, it appears that you may as well have thrown the values in the bin, because they meant nothing. They were words on a wall, and that was it. That is appalling, because children have been failed because of a failure to live up to those values.

Cultural change has been discussed already. Effecting cultural change is not an easy undertaking in any circumstances. Does the Education Authority have the ability in the organisation to drive cultural change itself, or does an external consultant need to be brought in to ensure that it is driven from the top down to every level of the organisation? Cultural change is essential to making the changes that need to happen in order to help the children who need help the most.

Ms Long: That cultural change can only be driven from within, because it has to be driven and owned by our own teams and staff, as Cynthia described. I believe that the work that Cynthia and the team are doing will assist us. Whatever we need to do or assess as an organisation in order to do that, we will do it.

Mr McNulty: My advice is that external consultation would be helpful in guiding cultural change and providing the know-how to be able to bring it about.

You mentioned the Capita One system for children's records. Can you describe it for me, please?

Ms Allen: In what way? Do you mean describe what it is?

Mr McNulty: How does it work? Is every child on the Capita One system? Does every person in the Education Authority have access to the system?

Ms Allen: It is the main management information system for the Education Authority's children's records. There are a number of what we call "modules" in the system, one of which is particularly for special education. All children who receive special education will be on the system. It will contain all their details, who their workers are etc. There is a particular module that deals with the statementing process. As an audit team, we viewed the system and how it was being used in the offices. As part of the transformation action plan that had been commenced, a number of procedures were put in place to make sure that accurate information was going into the system. As you will understand, we previously had five education and library boards, so there were five legacy systems. Therefore we had, if you like, five Capita One systems. There is now one EA, so all that information is in one area.

There is limited access to Capita One, for reasons of information governance and security. Therefore, only staff who work in areas that need access to the system will have access to it. There are shortcomings with the current system, as it is quite old, and its reporting capabilities are perhaps not what we need. As I said, that is one of the actions in the improvement plan, because Capita One is a repository for information. It also plays a central role in driving proactive management, as it is from where we get the management information that we want the teams to be looking at. We are now using the system to get more robust management information in order to drive improvements and to monitor the impact of those improvements.

Mr McNulty: The system is therefore crucial to assessing your operations.

Ms Allen: Yes.

Mr McNulty: It enables you to access your data quickly. If you are not assessing, you are guessing.

Ms Allen: Absolutely. Hence, one of the recommendations is the need for a system manager in that area. That is part of the improvement process going forward.

Mr McNulty: Can you give me some advice for principals who feel that they are not getting definitive guidance on what actions to adopt in emergency cases? Principals can feel completely on their own.

Ms Allen: In emergency cases of children who need provision?

Mr McNulty: Children with special educational needs.

Ms Allen: There is short-term provision and emergency provision. At the actual stage at which a child gets provision — from the statement of intent through to supervision — we have a work stream that focuses on that particular area. As Donna mentioned earlier, there have been instances in which, for example, transport has been brought up by principals. Another issue has been emergency classroom assistants. The audit report found that some of our processes were letting us down because there was not good partnership working.

Based on the improvements going forward, I can say to principals that we will be doing everything that we can possibly do to make the situation better. As I said to one of the members earlier, communication is a particular aspect that needs improvement, and we will be working to try to improve communication. As a principal myself, I understand that there are frustrations with the process. I

therefore intend to try to make the situation better for principals. There is a lonely position, and they do need support. We will do everything that we can in future to try to make that happen.

Mr McNulty: You mention communication, Cynthia. A principal raised the issue of communication with me. Many new initiatives are being introduced, yet a lot of the communication with principals is via email only. They feel as though they are not being given appropriate airtime to be able to voice their real concerns. In any case, they do not feel that email is the appropriate medium by which to do so. What advice would you give to a principal who has five children who require special educational psychology screening but who has been allocated time for only three?

Ms Long: Justin, on Friday afternoon of last week, I met a group of school principals on that very issue. They were representing their wider group. Although the audit, and its report, focused on the statutory assessment process, what it highlighted to us was that the statutory assessment process is impacted on by other services. One of the key findings is that we really need to pay attention to and focus on the allocation of educational psychology services, how that currently happens and how it might happen, moving forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, may I supplement that briefly?

Were the management responsibilities for the statementing process the same as for the allocation of educational psychology?

Ms Long: No. They are separate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Sorry, Justin. Go ahead.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, Chair. Do you feel that it is a child-centred approach or child-friendly process if it is totally resource-driven?

Ms Long: On the statutory assessment process, as I said, we all accept that it is easy to see this as an administrative process, but it is not. It ought to be a child-centred process, and that is certainly where we want to bring the service to.

Mr McNulty: You are focused and determined about doing that.

Ms Long: We are absolutely determined to do that.

Mr McNulty: Given the shocking and appalling revelations that have been exposed as a result of this audit, what actions have or are being taken to hold those responsible for those failings to account?

Ms Long: They are serious findings, as I said, and I take them very seriously. I take the impact that they have on children and families very seriously. They are not findings in their own right. They are findings that indicate to us, so where there are shortfalls in the organisation, I, as the chief executive, am responsible for that. However, I am also responsible for taking forward improvements and for driving the changes that we need to happen. Any internal processes in the authority need to be allowed to conclude.

Mr McCrossan: I understand that, as head of the organisation, Sara, the buck stops with you.

Ms Long: It does, yes.

Mr McCrossan: However, will anyone be held directly accountable for those failings?

Ms Long: There are internal EA processes, Daniel, that need to be allowed to conclude.

Mr McCrossan: Yes, but I am not asking you for detail. I am asking: will people will be held accountable for the failings in that area? It is a yes or no.

Ms Long: I am not in a position to answer that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Following on from Justin's question, it is fairly clear that the Education Authority, in respect of statementing and support of children with special educational needs, has failed in its mission to provide high-quality education for all. You mentioned a Capita One system manager to try to ensure that that mission is improved. Has that system manager been appointed?

Ms Long: No. We are recruiting for that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is the timescale for appointment?

Ms Long: These are quite skilled people, so a job description has been finalised, and we will advertise the post imminently. We need to get the right person, Chris, so we need the right skill set.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for coming in. As outlined by the Chair and other members, the findings are stark and confirm for me, families, principals and stakeholders the experiences that we have had with children and young people's services. Sara, you have been upfront about the shortcomings. I welcome the fact that it is a priority for you and that you are going to be proactive. It is good to see Cynthia in the role because it is important to have somebody who was involved on the front line and knows the day-to-day issues.

Twice last year, my party colleagues, other members and I had asked the Education Authority to carry out reviews or reports, the first being a year ago — last March — when parents first went to the media and our board members to ask for a review. Some work was initiated, but, in September, when the next cases came along, like other members, our party met you, Sara, and the chair of the board, and we asked for an independent review or audit to be carried out or for there to be even an independent oversight.

According to the executive summary, Sara, it seems that you commissioned an independent internal audit. That is a bit of a contradiction. Is the EA content with the content and comprehensiveness of the audit, given that it was carried out by EA staff? That is in no way a criticism of Donna and her team but, for the sake of public confidence and based on what we have heard here today, the audit should have been carried out by people outside the Education Authority. That needs to be looked at going forward. Key finding (a)(ii) is particularly stark. It is quite clear that some staff made a mockery of the statementing process and their obligations to children and families. That is evidenced by the misuse of valid exceptions.

I have been in this role for two and a half years, and I reported to you and the previous chief executive what we — the chair of the board and our board members — have been experiencing. When I have engaged with stakeholders, such as the Children's Commissioner and the Children's Law Centre, they all continually raised the findings that we have talked about today. They have had the statistics and the evidence for a very long time with the cases that they were working on with families. It was frustrating for me, our board members and other members of my party that it seemed that that was not acted on.

I know that you are new to your role, Sara, and that the situation will be acted on now, but we should not have had to wait until a number of cases went to the media last year to do it. I believe that actions need to be taken extensively and widely. The report states that the statementing system is highly manual. In this day and age, that is stark. The report also states that staff believed that they did not have to work to time frames and that timescales were unachievable. As we heard today, I would expect that, in an organisation such as the Education Authority, there would be disciplinary procedures and ongoing line management and not just at crisis points.

Management deficiencies are frequently cited in the document. It is clear that many individuals are doing great work but, going by the audit, it is also clear that some in management positions have let some of the most vulnerable children down. Is the Education Authority saying that the management is ultimately responsible for the statementing backlog in the system?

Ms Long: There are a number of recommendations in the report and a number of key systemic issues are highlighted. We have recommendations for each of those issues and, as Cynthia described, we are working our way through them. A range of issues have been identified as to how we found ourselves in this position. You have received the same feedback as I have since coming into post. That is part of what the audit was designed to do: to make sure that I fully understood the nature and scale of the issues. I have confidence in the report that was completed. It is a detailed and thorough piece of work, which was carried out comprehensively over a period. As I said, it leads us to ask more

questions, particularly about other service areas that are linked to the statutory assessment process. I have confidence in the report in its own right.

Ms Mullan: To follow up on Robin's point, the recommendations need to be firmed up. We need stringent line management structure and accountability — that comes out from all of this. We need time frames for all the recommendations because the situation has gone on for a long time. It was the first thing that came to my door when I became an MLA. I have said to you in the past, Sara, that a member of my staff took part in two sets of training with the Children's Law Centre so that we could deal with the number of cases coming through the door. When we contacted the Education Authority, we were not getting the advice and support that we needed. That was the approach that I took.

We cannot touch on anything to do with HR, and I would not want to do that. Broadly speaking, however, can you give us any indication of the governance issues that ultimately led to the temporary allocation of some areas of responsibility?

Ms Long: No.

Ms Mullan: No. Furthermore, we need a separate review of educational psychologists. We meet people and chat to them, and they tell us that they did not go into that role to become form fillers. That is not what they are trained for. There needs to be a separate review. Justin made a very valid point about the allocation of hours. Schools are under pressure. A review needs to be done, it needs to be acted on immediately, and those resources need to come down the line. In the past, I was constantly being told by principals about their allocation of hours, but, when I discussed it with officials in the Education Authority, I was led to believe that there was not really an allocation of hours and that it was based on need. That is certainly not the case and it needs to be acted on.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Who is the director responsible for the management of the allocation of educational psychology hours?

Ms Long: The director of children and young people's services.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, but I asked previously if the managerial responsibility for statementing —

Ms Long: Sorry, I answered the previous question at assistant director level.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so the managerial responsibility for the statementing process and special schools, and the allocation of educational psychology hours were previously allocated to the director of children and young people's services. All those matters were under the management of the children and young people's services directorate. That is helpful clarification.

Before I bring Robbie in, may I seek clarification on a couple of points? Of the 2,268 open cases, 1,070 were beyond the 26 weeks, which is almost 50%. Was the start date on those the actual date of referral or a false start date stamp? Could those cases be longer than what you have assessed them to be?

Ms Allen: We did not look at all 2,000 cases. We were not able to do that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Given that you identified the inaccurate recording of referral dates for assessments, it is possible that some of those cases are waiting even longer than what you have established.

Ms Allen: There is a possibility, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have, however, reduced the number of cases that are in breach of that statutory deadline to 676. Is there a timescale for reducing that to zero?

Ms Long: As I said, Chris, we need to come back to the Committee with that. Our priority today was to share the findings and recommendations of the audit of practice. They are as they are. Cynthia's team is working on our improvement metrics and our timeline for those. We will absolutely share those with you, and you will have information on that and on the resource required, but you will understand that

that in itself will take some time. We wanted to come here and share the findings with you in advance of that.

Mr Butler: Donna, Sara and Cynthia, I have to look at your nameplates because I tried to memorise your names, but I could not. Thank you for what you have done so far. I thank members for their questions to you. I found them very useful, and the information that has been provided today has been good. It is a pity that we did not have it a number of weeks ago.

I have been listening and, although it may sound as if I am asking the same question, I am genuinely not. There is another level to this. I have had to write this down because there is quite a lot to it. It looks to me as if there was a chronic cultural failure in supporting and resourcing some of the most valued and vulnerable pupils in our schools. I think that that is accepted. The issues that jump out at me from the pages and from some of your reports are the attitudinal dismissal of statutory frameworks, the potential abuse or ignorance of the seven valid exceptions — hopefully, we will hear a wee bit more about those — and, inexplicably, in a single umbrella organisation, staff operating on multiple databases and platforms. We talked about the Capita One system, but that does not involve databases; databases are simple Microsoft issues, which has nothing to do with a system. It is incredible that that happened in one umbrella organisation. When you consider those three things out of the wider range of failures, it is easy to see why there was such a magnitude of failure. We talked about the 85% who did not complete in the time frame.

How on earth did it take a whistle-blowing allegation to bring this to where we are now, and why was it not recognised? We talked about the audit committee, the board and, perhaps, where management is. How was it not picked up as a red flag before someone was prepared to become a whistle-blower?

Ms Long: As I said, there was certainly feedback, Robbie. I met parents directly. Karen described some of the feedback that she provided. School principals provided feedback in this area. It was more of a trigger at that point in order to be able to absolutely understand the exact nature and extent of the issue, and it was general feedback that things needed to improve. I wanted absolute clarity from the audit about the nature and extent of the issue, so that we could have a targeted improvement plan. As Donna said, an improvement plan had been developed and was in place, and it was progressing, but it became clear that it was not having the desired impact or outcome. We wanted the audit to find out whether the improvements were having an impact on the ground. The audit concluded that no, they were not.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that, Sara. Today, we have focused on the good work and practice that you initiated, and I get that. What I do not understand is how 1,070 cases were sitting outside the statutory timeline and that the responsible person, either on a monthly or quarterly basis, was not highlighting it either to you or to the board as a major concern. My fear is that, while we might be able to fix this and come up with something, what is the framework and measurement to prevent that happening again? What does that look like on a quarterly basis so that a responsible person is able to say to you, "This is our target, and we have met it", or "We are not meeting our target, and I need more resources"? Rather than work that is being done, what does that assurance look like?

Ms Long: As an organisation, our performance management framework is under development. That will be about all our routine reporting and what comes through to the executive team and onwards to the board. Donna is leading on the development of that and our routine indicators. I feel very strongly — I said this at the start — that it will not be enough for us to simply describe to you how we are making improvements. We will absolutely have to demonstrate to you how we are making those improvements, particularly if they are to take place over time, so that you and I can see sustained progress. That is absolutely fundamental, and I fully accept your point on that. I have committed to bringing it back to Committee when we have fully developed those metrics because, in order to fully restore confidence, it will not be enough for us to say that we are making improvements. We will have to fully and absolutely demonstrate those improvements. I accept that.

Mr Butler: Just to finish this point, and I then have two more questions, if you do not mind. You asked to come back to this, Chair,

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, that is fine. I want to supplement your question. Go ahead with your question, and then I can ask mine.

Mr Butler: The valid exceptions —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Wait, then. Save that. Hold the question on valid exceptions. On non-compliance, are we saying that people were not providing the relevant processes with real information about how bad this was? That does not seem to have been covered in the findings. Questions about why systemic failure was not identified and audited by the EA board are probably for the EA board to answer. Another question for the board is: what is it doing to establish why there was a failure to identify this? In your audit, have you picked up any evidence of anything akin to a cover-up or a lack of the proactive provision of up-to-date and accurate information about these processes, because that will prevent the EA board from doing its job?

Ms Allen: We address that finding:

"Routine, standardised management information reports are not systematically and routinely produced or used for senior management".

That was a gap in the previous process. As Sara said, we are about to provide and implement a performance management framework. I say "we" as in my team and the independence of my team. We will produce and pull management information from our big systems. We will then report that through to the directors and onwards to the chief executive and the board. The performance management information will be much more visible.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What did the internal audit processes look like? What is the existing EA board process for the internal auditing of each directorate and its performance? Either that broke down or the information provided to it broke down. Which one was it?

Ms Long: There is a distinction between the internal audit process versus routine performance management information. As Donna said, we want to be where this information is routinely provided and publicly available. That is our goal. You will not have to ask me where we are; you will be able to see that at any given time.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that, and it is welcome. However, the public interest here is: what happened? What were the EA internal audit processes that did not pick up this systemic failing? Was it inadequate internal audit processes, or was it inadequate provision of information to those audit processes? Will you give us some insight into that?

Ms Long: My sense is that it was to do with the information provided rather than an internal audit process per se. If you are providing routine management information, as Donna described, you do not necessarily need to undertake an internal audit because you are aware of and clear about the issues.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I cannot work out why it is in anyone's interest not to report difficulties.

Ms Long: That is why we are here today, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is concerning, though, because the inadequate provision of information in relation to this process may well extend to other processes in a particular directorate that does not deal with just this process. A board will struggle to perform its functions if it is being kept in the dark about challenges in its organisation.

Robbie, I am keen to bring you in on valid exceptions. Thank you for your indulgence.

Mr Butler: Just before I go off that topic, the reason that I am focused on it, Chair, is that previously, in another guise, as a manager in the fire service, I had to report back. However, I reported back only on the questions that were asked on performance and output. I am keen to know what those people were asked to report. As the Chair asked: is it the report mechanism that is wrong? If it does not ask the right questions, it will not get the right information. The figure of 1,070 outside of that statutory framework should have been picked up on both counts. It should have been reported, and the information should have been sought.

As an MLA, I have had my eyes opened today, as, I am sure, have other members. We are trying to reach into the EA for information, on behalf of frustrated parents and pupils who are trying to access psychological assessments and those type of things. Very often, there were excuses, such as people being "off sick", "off form", "in maternity" or "on holiday". We know that the databases were an issue; they were probably not shared. No one seemed to be accountable for transferring cases. Things

seemed to sit on someone's desk forever. Is that an accurate analysis? Cases were with individuals and, if that individual was not there, there was no responsibility or policy that said, "This is how someone else has responsibility for that case or the overall caseload"?

Ms Allen: I can comment only on the statutory statementing process. We found that there was not a proactive management so, given that no routine management information was used, there was no helicopter view of the team. If a case was sitting for a long time, when perhaps somebody was off, we found that that was not proactively managed.

Mr Butler: I have just one more question. It is not of a piece with that. It is just to complement Justin's piece.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead. You could save yourself 30 seconds every time by just asking the question, Robbie.

Mr Butler: I am just looking for you to tell me off.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I never tell you off. Go ahead.

Mr Butler: I do not want to add to the very serious issues that you guys are dealing with. We must be clear that we are focusing on children who need some form of assessment process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Absolutely.

Mr Butler: As Justin rightly said, there are lots of children who cannot even access the process. It is right that we focus on fixing the problem with the backlog, but does fixing something that needs to be fixed constitute the whole problem? You have said, time and time again, "This is pupil-centred. It is individually focused" and so on. If that is the case — our teachers tell us that they are frustrated because pupils go through years of education without the ability to access an educational psychologist or assessment for special education needs — you have been frustrated many times, and it is good to see you addressing the issues. Whilst I want to see this fixed and the backlog addressed, can we have confidence that we will get a fundamental review and recommendations to improve the whole process? It really is more a root-and-branch issue.

Ms Long: Yes, Robbie, absolutely. We have a responsibility right here and right now to those children who are in the statementing process. That has been our immediate focus. The longer-term plan is to look at the entire end-to-end journey for children in this process. There is no point in running something faster, for example, if it is not the right thing to run. I am absolutely at one with you on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): There is a wider departmental review of SEN provision that has been ongoing for 10 years. Maybe this is a timely point to ask this question: to what extent did inadequate resources contribute to this failing?

Ms Long: It is difficult to comment without the analysis. What we do know, and what Cynthia has already encountered working with the teams, is that we will require more resources to address this backlog in even the short term. We are also already clear that we will require additional resources to put the support services in place, not just to run the statementing process. We are trying to quantify how much additional resource we need. Internally, we will be prioritising those immediate staff resources. That will certainly be an issue for us. However, we are clear that we will require additional resource.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In addition to extreme difficulty in accessing a statement, there are significant reports — I presume, across MLAs — of significant difficulty in accessing the stated support once it is in place. To build on Robbie's question, the statementing process itself is scheduled to change from five stages to three. Will your operations be ready to respond to those changes, given what has been identified by the audit?

Ms Long: That will depend on the implementation date and the level of resource that comes with those changes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): There are seven valid exceptions:

"a. further advice needs to be sought by the Board to complete its assessment;" —

which seems extremely wide-ranging —

*"b. parents wish to provide advice to the Board more than 6 weeks after they were invited to do so;
c. advice from a school principal is delayed because of school closure;
d. advice sought from a HSS Trust has not been provided within 6 weeks;
e. exceptional personal circumstances affect the child or parent;
f. the child or parent is away for at least 4 weeks during the 18 week period; or
g. an appointment for examination or test is not kept."*

To what extent are those seven valid exceptions fit for purpose? Is there a pattern to which of those exceptions were used to except an assessment from being completed within 26 weeks?

Ms Long: The valid exceptions are in the legislation. We expect that they will change when the legislation changes. Their being fit for purpose and their timeliness are part of the discussions that we have been having with the Department of Education.

Ms Allen: Although they are in the legislation, and setting aside the practice, we believe that they are not helpful to the statementing process because there is no upper limit. Legally, you could apply a valid exception because there is a delay in receiving health advice. There is no upper limit on that. In the new legislation, there are upper limits if the advice is not received within a certain time. We felt that that was one of the weaknesses in that. It is important to say that it is legal to apply a valid exception and that deficiencies in the valid exceptions have led to some of the issues.

One of the major ones that we encountered was valid exceptions as a result of health advice. The audit team was given information that highlighted that almost two thirds of the valid exceptions that were applied were due to health advice not being provided, and then about 24% were other professionals, schools or parents within six weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Did we ask how many of the 1,070 cases that were beyond the 26-week deadline had valid exceptions?

Ms Allen: I do not think that you asked me that, no.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I?

Ms Allen: I do not have the exact figure, but I would say that a considerable amount — a high percentage — had valid exceptions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): And two thirds of the valid exceptions were as a result of advice that was sought from health and social care trusts not being provided within six weeks?

Ms Allen: Yes. That was the valid exception that had been applied to the case.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Did the audit or the EA explore the reasons why health and social care trusts did not provide advice within six weeks?

Ms Allen: It is important to say that the team acknowledged that there are definite delays with advice and, specifically, medical information being received. We also believe that, once a valid exception had been applied, that proactive management —. We had evidence that information had been received back from Health, but that cases had actually not been moved on because of that lack of proactive management.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Once that 26-week deadline was breached, it was breached and the deadlines were not there any more, but it —.

Ms Allen: We have worked —.

Ms Long: We have done work with Health, Chris. It goes back to the point that the audit was designed to provide us with the nature and extent of the issues. As I think I said, it raises as many questions for

us. We have been doing work with Health and we know that DE is working closely with Health on the new regulations and legislation so that we can be much more clear and specific on what health advice is required, why we require it and how long that ought to take.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Our predecessor Committee hosted an evidence session on the same or similar matters at Stranmillis College, Clerk.

The Committee Clerk: Indeed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Health staff presented at that, and this issue was identified. It is incumbent on anyone with responsibility for those matters to further probe what is happening with the failure of our health and social care trusts to provide information within six weeks. Is it a reasonable deadline?

Ms Long: I was going to say, Chris, that I think —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It does not seem like the audit had scope to properly investigate that aspect of it, and we are talking about two thirds of cases beyond 26 weeks, which is a high percentage, being valid exceptions. There is a real need to investigate the role of health and social care trusts in the process.

Ms Long: I agree with you, but I would also draw you back to Robbie's point that we need to look at the full process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Is that being done?

Ms Long: It will be.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): By the Department and the Education Authority?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: My question is about the 1,070 figure. Some have waited up to two years to be stated or reviewed, and I am thinking about the overall rippling consequences of that on classroom environments and the burden of stress that that places on teachers, principals and, directly, the other pupils or children in the classroom. One of the biggest stressors in this for teachers and principals is how they manage a non-existent resource. If a child in a classroom is distressed or in need of attention, in the absence of a classroom assistant or support staff, which, in many cases, is the reality, a teacher will divert their immediate attention to that child. So in actual fact, throughout this entire process, quite a number of children have suffered the consequences of this failure. Is that accurate?

Ms Long: Daniel, it goes back to my original point, which is that it is easy to see this as an administrative process. It is not an administrative process; it impacts greatly on children, and that is why I take it so seriously. It is because of the impact of this process on children. Cynthia, do you want to comment?

Ms Currie: From a school perspective, I concur with what you are saying. Unmet need and undue delay will have an impact in the classroom and on the child, on other children and on staff on the front line who are dealing with that. It will also impact head teachers and pastoral care heads who are working with the families. I reiterate what I said before: we absolutely have to fix that. It is unacceptable that there are these delays. I concur that people have been failed by the system, and we will do our best, moving forward, to make sure that this is better.

Mr McCrossan: The funding of vital and necessary resources, in terms of support staff and other elements, is hugely important, particularly for the school and, more directly, for the children who are impacted. Thank you for that answer.

There are a number of other things. How long do you think it will take to implement some of the recommendations or the changes that you are proposing? What is the time frame to get these into place? It was touched on when I left the room.

Ms Long: As Cynthia said, we have the action plan. We want to put very clear and robust improvement metrics around that action plan, so that it is not just a series of actions on which we give our assessment to you as to whether or not they have been concluded. We want to ensure that we are actually measuring the impact of that and can demonstrate that improvement. I have committed to bringing that back to the Committee so that we can give you a robust and accurate assessment of how long it will take and how much resource will be required to deliver it.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you for that answer as well. Throughout this session, I have been battling with myself about the audit process generally. What made you opt for an internal audit, as opposed to a fully independent audit?

Ms Long: As I said, at that point I had heard feedback about these areas, and I wanted to get an assessment of the extent and nature of the issues in relation to that feedback. I had a team of people within the organisation who could do that and who I had full confidence and trust in to deliver that. That is the approach that I took. It brings us to this audit today, which outlines for us what it is. It is findings and it is the nature and the impact, but, as I said, it clearly has implications that are wider than this process, and we will have to attend to those.

Mr McCrossan: I appreciate that. The Chair rightly expressed, as other members will, concerns about other directorates and areas of responsibility across the EA. If this is what has been exposed as a result of an internal audit, do you have any concerns that there may be other substantial issues in other areas of the EA that will need the same approach?

Ms Long: That is what our performance management framework is designed to do: to provide me with early alerts and routine information on all areas of EA business so that we can, where we need to, have a deeper and further look.

Mr McCrossan: Sara, given that you have only been in the role a short time, do you not feel that, to get a clearer picture, it would be much more beneficial to have an independent review of the EA so that we know exactly what the starting point is and what needs to be achieved as a result of it? If we take this bit-by-bit approach where we get a report and we get another report, it is going to lead to considerable difficulty, time delays and, maybe, further revelations about other areas like those that we have heard today. After today, I am coming back to the view that a fully independent review of the Education Authority will be necessary. Given that you have been in the organisation for just under a year, do you share that view? Are you open to that?

Ms Long: I would be open to that, but I do not have a fixed view on it. We have attended an awful lot to structures and processes in education over a long period of time, which I believe has been to the detriment of services and service delivery. I would like our focus to be on services, service delivery and the service that we provide to children and young people. I want us, as an Education Authority, to be able to instil and build confidence among the public and our wider stakeholders. Part of that has to be demonstrating that we are an organisation that can hold itself to account and has robust governance arrangements so that we can highlight and bring forward things like this ourselves, rather than always relying on someone else to do it on our behalf. That is my view.

Mr McCrossan: It is a mammoth task, and I appreciate that you will take it seriously.

Ms Long: I accept that. We are a very large and complex organisation, so we have to ensure we balance all of that.

Mr McCrossan: Just a final point. Of the many children and families affected, how many have been pushed to tribunals to try to get provision for their children? Are you aware of those figures?

Ms Allen: Yes, we have figures on that; it is one of the areas that we have covered in the audit. It is also one of the areas that we talked about in one of the recommendations. I called it the SAP panel, which is the statutory assessment panel. That is where they make decisions on whether to proceed with a statement. The information that we have has highlighted that there were a number of cases that were either conceded once they went to tribunal or overturned. That is an area, in terms of our findings and the recommendations, where there needs to be work done on the decision-making process around statements so that parents do not feel that they need to go to tribunal. Obviously, there is an issue around our decision-making when we are conceding a high volume of cases, so absolutely that is an area that we highlighted in the audit.

Mr McCrossan: Can you share some of those figures?

Ms Allen: Yes. In 2018-19, there were 341 appeals handled, of which 184 were conceded by the Education Authority.

Mr McCrossan: Sorry, there were 184 conceded, yes?

Ms Allen: Yes. As an audit team, we felt that that was considerably high and —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): One in two; 50%.

Ms Allen: — indicated that there was an issue around the decision-making process. As I said, it is one of our findings and one of our recommendations, and it is included in the improvement work.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Did that not red-flag anything?

Ms Allen: It did to us as an audit team; absolutely. That is why it is in the findings and we have a separate —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Prior to the audit? How, in 2018-19, were one in two appeals being conceded and no one anywhere thought it was a red flag?

Mr McCrossan: And also, Chair, the stress of that being placed on a parent, who may not be equipped to deal with the internal processes that they have had to go through to fight for the interests of their children and get what they should have got long before that time. That frustrates me. I mention that specifically because my sister had to go through it, so I know the stress that was on her and the preparations that had to be made on top of dealing with her child, who was in desperate need. I am also concerned, when you see that one in two cases were conceded, about the cost of that process, the resources pumped into it and the obvious wastage. That will come as a great annoyance to many principals and teachers who have been starved of the necessary resources to support those children.

There are huge lessons to learn here, and we can sit all day around this Committee and take considerable chunks out of what has happened in the past, but I sincerely hope that we can rectify this, sort it out and instil some confidence in it, for our children more than anything. Sara, you are new to the role and you have my best wishes and support in trying to rectify the situation, but I do not envy the task that lies ahead and the challenges that you will face. Unfortunately, this will not be the end of some of the issues that are going to arise.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): A very brief supplementary from me on an issue previously raised. How and by whom are the health and social care trusts held to account for not providing advice within six weeks? It is not clear.

Ms Allen: There has been work ongoing between the Education Authority and the Health Department under the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Health and social services trusts have appointed SEN coordinators, because they recognise that this is a challenge for them. We may be seeking advice from a number of professionals from within the trusts, so SEN coordinators have been appointed to streamline processes and improve timescales for a return of medical advices to EA. This work has only started, and the SEN coordinators were only appointed in around September of last year, but, when we spoke to the teams, there was evidence that the appointment of those SEN coordinators had improved performance already, and it is anticipated that there will be more improvements in those areas with the allocation of that additional resource.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In an age of the 2015 Act and joined-up government, it is deeply concerning that that delay from health and social care trusts in relation to the provision of medical advice is such a significant contributor to delays in processing assessments. It clearly does need to be explored. Deputy Chair, do you want to come in?

Ms Mullan: Can I just come on that one?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have you questions to ask also, Deputy Chair?

Ms Mullan: No, just on that. I know that the review has brought up more questions. How proactive have EA staff been in following up the medical reports? Did they just wait until they came back?

Ms Allen: There were varying degrees of that, Karen. Yes, in some areas they were not proactive. In a number of areas, we were not proactive in following that advice up. It was considered that there were going to be delays, and so it was not always followed up, no.

Ms Mullan: Is there one SEN coordinator in each trust?

Ms Allen: There is one in each trust, yes. That has definitely improved, even just in that our staff in our teams in our offices have somebody to contact and liaise with. It is definitely an improvement.

Mr Newton: I was going to refer to the points that William and Justin made earlier about culture. Sara, is it your responsibility to accept the 10 recommendations?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Newton: It is your responsibility? That is grand. Can I ask you about number 10? William and Justin asked about the culture, and members were concerned about whether the culture that had applied in this SEN area, addressed in number 10, may apply in other areas. What is your schedule for addressing number 10?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Recommendation 10 being the transfer of learning from this audit across the Education Authority, yes?

Ms Long: I think that that is via the performance management framework, and I think the other thing is that it is also the start of the culture of improvement that, where we take findings in one area, we apply them across rather than, potentially, them being siloed, if you like, within individual directorates. I think number 10 is very important for me in ensuring that we do not do a piece of work in one area where there are lessons learnt and things that can be done and we do not apply them across the other areas, and that we do that in a more systematic way through our performance framework.

Mr Newton: The next time we see you — I make the assumption, Chair, on your —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think that it will be soon.

Mr Newton: The next time we see you, we will have a performance framework that will have dates and targets and personal responsibilities, measurements and end dates.

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Newton: That is good.

I was a little bit concerned when we talked about the communication and reference was made to a helpline. I suggest that, in these circumstances, a helpline is not going to be adequate, given what will go out after this meeting. I wonder whether you might think, Sara, about a better approach, a more empathetic approach to the parents by having that direct face-to-face contact with the parents or the guardians or their representatives.

Ms Long: I do not think that the helpline is to substitute for that, Robin. We were just conscious that we are here today having this conversation and that, if any parent is feeling immediate distress, there are trained staff there available to deal with that. That is not a substitute for any of the ongoing communication, which I agree is best done face to face. It is not an either/or scenario.

Mr Newton: You are going to be proactive in that field now, am I right?

Ms Long: Yes.

Ms Currie: The chief executive made reference to some of the short-term resource that we need to put in. We are mindful that one of the areas for short-term resource is in trying to make the offices more front-facing, where they can have that contact with children.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Those are pertinent points, Robin. The first one was about regular and substantive updates to the Committee, with detailed performance metrics attached to the 10 key recommendations. How soon could you return to the Committee with a more robust framework for the implementation of those recommendations?

Ms Long: Our original plan for that was the end of March.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. The importance of parental engagement is a very pertinent point. The families of 676 children are involved, so it is not inconceivable that you could hold engagement with parents. I know that the parents for equal education coalition was established in response to the opposition to the proposed reduction of SEN nursery hours to part time and has been engaged with around some of those issues. It may be worthwhile seeking to engage with the coalition. I am sure that you have contact details for that, but if we can be of any assistance in that regard or with facilitating engagement with parents, we are more than willing to do that.

Ms Long: Thank you. That is appreciated.

Mr McNulty: We have talked a lot about the performance process, databases, metrics and systems: all the hard stuff. I want to talk about culture again. Culture is the soft stuff, and the soft stuff is the hard stuff. It is an abstract and analogous term, but changing the culture in an organisation such as the Education Authority is no easy undertaking. I impress on you the importance of maybe appointing an external consultant to guide you in that work. The bedrock of a company's culture is that company's values. Values are not about writing words on a wall; if values are embraced properly, they guide your behaviour and drive your performance. I encourage you to seek advice on that. Your values must be interwoven into every aspect of your organisation's being. That does not happen by just putting them on the wall; it happens through discussing them regularly.

I thank each of you for appearing before us today. It has been tough for you to sit where you are today. We appreciate your honesty, endeavour and determination to put things right, and we wish you well with the major task that you all face.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do any other Members have final comments or questions? No.

Earlier, Justin identified the mission of the Education Authority: to deliver a quality education for every child — openness, transparency. Your evidence and engagement with the Committee today has been in line with that mission. We thank you for that. We welcome the apology that you have given to families affected. We welcome the action that you have taken to establish the extent of the failure to assess and support children with special educational needs and the urgent actions that you have put in place to progress those assessments and the delivery of that support. However, there are further questions that, perhaps, even you cannot answer that we need to pursue with other bodies. I think that more than one MLA has suggested today that a full, independent review of the Education Authority is necessary to fully re-establish confidence.

I thank you for your openness and transparency and the action that you have taken to do all that you can to restore that confidence, to the extent that you can, on this issue. We will seek a future hearing with you soon to hear exactly how the 10 recommendations are being progressed. Thank you.

Ms Long: Thank you.