



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Special Educational Needs Statementing Report:
Education Authority

24 June 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Special Educational Needs Statementing Report: Education Authority

24 June 2020

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

Witnesses:

Ms Cynthia Curry	Education Authority
Ms Sara Long	Education Authority
Ms Una Turbitt	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): May I confirm that we have, from the Education Authority (EA), Sara Long, the chief executive, Una Turbitt, the interim director of children and young people's services, and Cynthia Curry, the head of transformation? Can you hear me, Sara?

Ms Sara Long (Education Authority): Yes, I can. Can you hear us?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I can indeed.

As a welcome, I will say that the Committee has previously heard from the Education Authority on the internal audit of the special educational needs (SEN) statutory assessment or statementing process. Obviously, members were shocked by the systemic failure that was uncovered by the audit and the way in which children with special educational needs and their families had been failed. I look forward to your update on the Education Authority response to those significant failings. I invite you take up to 15 minutes to summarise the report and to set out the progress that has been made on SEN statementing.

Ms Long: Thank you, Chair. Today I want to update the Committee on the recommendations of the final special education audit of practice and how we are progressing with improving outcomes for children and to set out my views on the future delivery of SEN services.

I should first say something about the impact of the lockdown, which was introduced just two weeks after we last appeared before the Committee. EA is the employing authority for around 40,000 staff, and, in support of the "Stay at home" message to protect the health service, our buildings closed to the

public on Friday 20 March. Emergency planning processes were implemented to deliver critical services, with the focus on supporting schools offering provision to the children of key workers. We established a critical operations centre to meet schools' immediate needs and demands for equipment and resources. We redeployed our workforce where required and developed home-based critical services as well as business-critical office-based services. In conjunction with our colleagues in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), we established a link officer network to provide immediate comprehensive pastoral support for each school leader and set up an online application process to manage requests for placements for key worker children. We have supported schools through our C2k platform to facilitate online learning for children. In response to the Executive's decision to make a payment to children who are entitled to free school meals, we quickly developed an electronic system that enabled over 100,000 children to receive their payment on a fortnightly basis.

The lockdown measures came at a crucial stage of the preschool, primary and post-primary transfer process for over 75,000 children. I advise that we were able to complete those processes and ensure that the children received their placement letters in a timely manner.

Our Youth Service continues to provide support to children and young people, and we have distributed approximately 3,000 food boxes per week as part of the Eat Well, Live Well programme. We have developed a wide range of online resources for children with special needs and redesigned our website so that they are easily accessible for families.

Members will recall from our last evidence session the description of some of the statutory assessment process, including the highly paper-intensive administrative processes and the underinvestment in technology, software and hardware. Shifting to a home-based workforce was, therefore, particularly challenging, but, where possible, it was achieved in a matter of days and weeks. While it has caused some delays to our services, I thank all the EA team and the wider education workforce for their dedication, hard work, long hours and commitment during an anxious and worrying time.

As noted, SEN is one of our critical services, and our commitment to deliver improvements, in spite of the challenges of COVID-19, remains unchanged. The disruption has set back the pace of change that was outlined in March, but, despite the challenging headwinds, progress is being made. My colleague Cynthia will provide a more detailed overview, but improvements are being made to reduce the number of children who have been waiting the longest for the completion of their statutory assessment. I can report to the Committee that, at the end of November 2019 1,070 of all open cases were delayed beyond the 26-week statutory framework. By June, that had reduced to 597. There has been an 82% reduction in children waiting over 60 weeks and a 61% reduction in children waiting over 40 weeks. Those figures are still too high, but they are beginning to move in the right direction.

I should add that, in addition to the radical changes to process caused by lockdown, including the introduction of new protocols to handle sensitive pupil information electronically, the period from March is one of the busiest in the SEN calendar as it coincides with the review of statements for children transferring to a different level of education. That has involved reviewing, sometimes substantially, the statements of over 2,600 children and doing so with new systems and no face-to-face meetings. That has been an immense challenge for my colleagues working in the SEN service, and they have risen to the challenge. Their ability to adapt and change in these difficult circumstances has been a great encouragement, and I am confident that they are ready for the cultural changes that are required to transform SEN services.

The statutory assessment process is but one part of SEN services. Since becoming chief executive last year, I saw that it was evident that it required urgent attention. However, when we initiated the statutory assessment audit of practice in the autumn of 2019 and started to implement improvements, other service gaps were identified. That has been reinforced by the recommendations of the recent Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) report, 'Too Little, Too Late'. We have accepted the recommendations of the report, and, while some of them further reinforce the findings of the audit of practice, the NICCY report's findings go further in scope. We are committed to working with the commissioner, and we are incorporating the actions required into our improvement plans.

Fixing the process properly will involve addressing the many interconnecting parts that make up the service. We need an holistic reform of the service, and, in incorporating the recommendations of the NICCY report into our improvement plan, we will be able to do that. It will take time and new ways of working, internally and externally, and it will require additional resources. That holistic approach will

enable us to put in place the right systems and people to facilitate the cultural changes required, as identified in the audit of practice. It will enable us to properly address delays in statutory assessment and the tribunal process and to incorporate the NICCY recommendations and the SEN early years consultation.

The new improvement approach is a longer-term solution, but I assure the Committee that the work identified in the audit of practice will continue. It has provided us with an evidence base and 10 broad recommendations that have been transposed into a detailed improvement project brief and project plan. It includes objectives, targets and timelines and 18 measurement metrics against four different areas. There are over 40 specific actions, each with specific time frames and outcomes.

At a corporate level, this will be supported and driven forward by a dedicated SEN programme board, an improvement team and individual work streams. Further oversight will be provided by the EA board, the Department of Education and, importantly, advisory forums consisting of parents and carers, children and young people and school practitioners. Incorporating the voice of the child and other stakeholders will be central to delivering a truly child-centred service, and we have built those into the foundations of the change process. My colleague Cynthia will talk in more detail about progress on tackling current issues with the statutory assessment process, the operational changes that have been implemented already and the feedback that we have received from parents and stakeholders.

Progress is being made to reduce the length of time for the children who have been waiting the longest. When schools return to normal, it will make a difference to the educational experience of those children as well as help their families and the wider school communities. However, it is also clear that SEN services need holistic reform. Unless we address the interlinking parts, the improvements that we make in statutory assessment will not in themselves provide the improved outcomes that we want for children and their families. This provides us with a framework to deliver a very different service. It will take time, it will not be easy and there will be setbacks, but we want to change and to be transparent. We want children, parents and stakeholders to be part of this process along with the Department and the Committee. I am happy to provide regular updates to the Committee, be that in person or through the provision of management information. I invite the Committee to visit one of our offices when life is back to normal and talk directly to our staff delivering the service. We are taking steps in the right direction, but there are major questions still to be addressed, not least over budget and how to design the new service delivery. I want parents and the Committee to know that we are listening and willing to challenge every work process and every presumption in order to provide the best service that we can with the resources available to us.

I will ask Cynthia to provide the Committee with a little bit more on the operational detail.

Ms Cynthia Curry (Education Authority): Thanks, Sara. As members will be aware, an update report is in your papers outlining progress against each of the seven work streams underpinning our improvement plans. I can advise that, in the short term, we have been deliberately focusing on children who have been waiting longest for their statement to be completed. While even one child waiting too long is one too many, there have been significant improvements. Between November 2019 and 23 June 2020, there was an 87% reduction in children waiting more than 80 weeks, an 82% reduction in those waiting more than 60 weeks and a 61% reduction in those waiting over 40 weeks. That is particularly noteworthy, as the majority of children waiting longest also tend to be the most complex cases.

Our work has involved a case-by-case analysis, with each child being treated not as a number but as a unique individual in their own right with their own unique set of circumstances. We have increased multidisciplinary working across services, had numerous conversations with parents and schools in identifying the most appropriate provision and placement for children and reviewed feedback from complaints in cases for tribunal to identify issues in the current system. Alongside that case-by-case analysis, we have begun to improve the system in key areas, including engagement with stakeholders, information governance and staff capacity building. I will take a few moments to look at those now.

Maximising the use of our management information system and associated reports has already enabled much clearer monitoring and tracking of individual cases and trends. We have also developed key improvement metrics to monitor progress. That information is produced on a weekly basis for senior management review. We are carrying out a detailed analysis of demand for and capacity in the service to better inform our improvement journey, to understand areas of delay and determine whether we have sufficient capacity to address demand. That will enable us to achieve meaningful and sustainable improvements. The work will include preparation for the implementation of new timescales through the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act 2016.

We have completed a significant reconfiguration of our systems to enable better data flow and more efficient management information between SEN statutory operations and other EA services. We are exploring the potential of new digital portals to provide parents, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), health professionals and others with a new challenge to transact digitally with the EA. The aim is to improve the transparency of the SEN processes and provide better insight for parents. Development and progress have been delayed due to COVID-19 but are under way again, including securing funding for phase 2 of the small business research initiative (SBRI) project on making best use of multi-agency SEN data.

Targeted work to address information governance issues is under way. Online refresher training has been developed and delivered to staff, and good progress has been made in the safe sharing of electronic data with parents, schools and the health and social care trusts. Information governance plans directly linked to practices in an office environment have, however, been limited due to COVID-19. Those include minor works that may be required in some offices.

Crucially, work is under way to support staff capacity and address inconsistencies identified by the audit of practice. Initially, there was engagement with staff in the offices and workshop opportunities to introduce practices such as regular meetings to monitor caseloads; increased use of data to monitor performance; a focus on improved information governance; and a clear expectation of cultural change as a front-facing service.

Throughout the pandemic, we continue to meet daily with senior advisory staff to monitor progress and practices. We are developing and have begun to roll out online training for all staff. We have progressed aspects of recruitment where there were gaps, including some staff in non-critical services supporting the SEN statutory operations staff during COVID-19.

I must not underestimate the degree to which staff on the ground have positively engaged in the change process. They are adapting to new ways of working and new cultural shifts, often putting in personal effort way over and above in challenging circumstances and with many competing priorities. I publicly express my gratitude to them for their efforts through these tough and uncertain times.

Whilst we have some way to go and continue to have challenges in the change process — I acknowledge that, for some children and their families, we have yet to resolve all their issues — I am pleased to share that staff on the improvement team have received positive feedback for their work thus far. That is a small but significant sign of progress. Data can tell us part of the story, but people's experiences, particularly those who represent the vulnerable, are much more fundamental in any change.

For me, as a school principal and a family member of children who have gone through the process, work stream 7 is among the most important: building the trust and confidence of stakeholders. Being able to see at first hand, professionally and personally, how the system works from the child's perspective is vital. That is an essential work stream in its own right, but it also underpins the rest of the improvement work.

A recent email from a parent to me said:

"The majority of parents who share their frustrations with me aren't actually to do with the processes when you speak to them but, rather, their understanding of how it works."

We have been clear in our message that the principles of openness, transparency and respect when working with children, families and schools are to be at the centre of all business and at the forefront of the change process.

Prior to lockdown, I had the privilege of meeting a range of stakeholders face to face, including parents, school practitioners and interest groups, many of whom had negative personal experiences of the system but were keen to help to shape improvements. Those personal stories and experiences are key in contributing to service improvement.

Every child's story is unique — we cannot lose sight of that — but common themes have emerged and are contributing to the focus of our improvement work, including a focus on effective communication, providing front-end information and support for children and families who are entering the process for the first time and ongoing updates throughout the process from a named link officer.

We have also bolstered the helpline; indeed, since the start of April, we have taken 1,671 calls as well as increasing the number of opportunities for officers to contact parents directly. We are simultaneously seeing a decrease in complaints.

We are disappointed that more face-to-face engagement and co-design has not been possible, given the current position, but, hopefully, this will come as we begin to return to some sense of normality. We have continued to develop support materials for parents, some of which are provided online, to help them to have a better understanding of the process and to support their child's needs.

During the planning and implementation of the improvement plans, a good deal of ongoing baselining, scoping and mapping of interdependencies has been key. Reflective sessions have been facilitated to focus on the lessons learnt from the audit of practice and, for example, from the recent NICCY report and external stakeholder feedback. It is clear that, since the statutory assessment process is closely linked to so many other service areas and Departments, true transformation of the service will not be possible without addressing areas where there are interdependencies. The Education Authority is developing a holistic approach to improvement that will include a focus on those interdependencies, the recent recommendations from the NICCY report as well benchmarking with other jurisdictions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Cynthia. Sara, are you OK to take questions now?

Ms Long: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thank you.

Sara, I would welcome regular engagement with you on these serious matters. I think that there is a perception that the special education area planning statementing process is in a state of dysfunction, and we need to build on the work that you have initiated and have set out comprehensively today. Why is there no Education Authority board representation here today?

Ms Long: I understand that our chair wrote directly to you and the Clerk and addressed that issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Why were these systemic failings not identified by way of internal audit by the Education Authority board?

Ms Long: It is difficult for me to speak about what did not occur before I was in post. We listened to the feedback from parents and other stakeholders, and, as a result, we undertook the audit of practice. I commissioned that in autumn 2019, when I had not long been in post.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): To the extent that you are legally permitted to say, who is responsible and accountable for the systemic failure?

Ms Long: Internal processes are under way, Chair *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I picked you up there, Sara, but the sound may have diminished slightly.

Ms Long: OK. Is it better now?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a bit better now. Thank you.

Recommendation 5 states:

"A review of the term 'Valid Exceptions' needs to take place as there is inconsistency in definition, interpretation and application of these as well as gaps in the current list."

What progress has been made in addressing those significant problems with the valid exceptions?

Ms Long: That work is under way. I will ask Cynthia to give you a bit more detail on that.

Ms Curry: Work is under way. I should clarify that the metrics that we shared with you today do not include valid exceptions. We have been clear that, until we are absolutely certain that we have carried

out our work around valid exceptions, including looking case by case at, first, the valid exception that was given and, secondly, the follow-up to that valid exception, and are certain and clear about how the valid exception is being used, we have not included that in our statistical analysis. We are working our way through those and learning from valid exceptions as we go, but there is no doubt that some of the metrics that we are sharing are valid valid exceptions, if that makes sense. We hope to share with you in the near future the outcome of that ongoing work.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is particularly problematic, Cynthia, because, unless I am wrong, most of the delays are due to valid exceptions. Does that mean that your metrics are skewed positively as a result of not including valid exceptions?

Ms Curry: No, sorry. The valid exceptions are included in the metrics. We have not reported excluding valid exceptions. All of the valid exceptions are included in the metrics. Until we are absolutely certain that we can do that with certainty, we will continue to keep those within the metrics.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is a wider review of valid exceptions required as part of the new SEN framework? How will we improve valid exceptions fundamentally?

Ms Curry: The review will include two things: looking at the nature of valid exceptions and at why we award them. That has been part of the SEN implementation work to date. It is also about having the correct tracking and monitoring systems in place so that we follow up valid exceptions. Again, that will be part of the new SEN implementation, where there are upper time frames for waiting for advice.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you. I have further questions on school placements, but I will bring members in on this important matter before returning to that.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Sara, Cynthia and Una, for coming today and for your update. Progress has been made over this period, which has been difficult for everybody, including those who work in the Education Authority. I thank you all for the work that you have done over this difficult period and will continue to do over the summer in relation not only to special educational needs but to the broader school community.

I am encouraged to hear about the inclusion of stakeholders, including parents and young people and, in particular, NICCY. The Children's Commissioner gave us an update last week on improved relationships and communication. I am heartened to hear that the Education Authority will take on board the recommendations from the 'Too Little, Too Late' report. There is much work to be done on all of that, and we, as a Committee, will require regular updates. As MLAs, we are being contacted outside of this as well. As we said, children were badly let down by the process, and families were concerned to hear this morning that 285 children have not yet been placed in schools. The Minister has given us a commitment that, after a meeting tomorrow, he will come back to us with an update on that. We would like to know where that pressure is coming from and find out a wee bit more detail.

Last week, the Children's Commissioner spoke to the Committee about the report. Some things really stuck out, particularly the bit about the Education Authority not holding data. A lot of that was to do with the stage 3 services. Will that be addressed? As touched on, high levels of suspensions, expulsions and timetable reductions are not formalised. May we hear a wee bit more about how all of that is to be addressed?

Ms Long: Yes, Karen. We work closely with the commissioner and are committed to doing so. We are also committed to openness and transparency in what we do and to sharing what we do and our information. The Education Authority is a public-sector organisation. We have a duty to do that and will do that. Cynthia will pick up on the detail on expulsions and suspensions data.

Ms Curry: On your first point about stage 3 services and the data that is held at school level, I mentioned the interdependencies that interlink with the statutory assessment process. One such interdependency is when children come into the system. We have to get to a place where children get early interventions, help and support at an earlier stage in schools. We recognise that a number of children are still waiting for support. We do not currently hold that data. It is largely held by schools, but we have to understand that population and that unmet need. As part of a holistic approach in going forward, we will not transform the statutory assessment process without looking at children in the earlier stages. We need to look at the support that they get and the support that is given on the other

side of their having achieved the statementing process. That is certainly one of the interdependencies that we need to look at.

The data for suspensions and expulsions is similar, in that it is held by schools. There is no doubt that we have to get better at early intervention and support for schools to help them with children who are, for example, displaying behavioural difficulties. We also need better knowledge and oversight of the number of children whose data is held by schools.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Cynthia. You did not deal with the timetable reductions. Those must be formalised. The EA must hold that data so that we can put the support in place for our schools and principals and resource that support — that is a difficulty at the minute — so that children do not continue to fall through the net. It is important that that is taken forward.

Neither 'Too Little, Too Late' nor the audit document addresses the particular issues and SEN pressures in the Irish-medium sector. We need to ensure that, going forward, the work of the Education Authority includes the issues and unique circumstances there. It should work with the sectoral bodies and the schools on that, gather evidence and provide recommendations for how we go forward. Sara, are you aware of that? Have you started to look at it?

Ms Long: Yes, Karen. Members of our board have raised the issue and asked us to assure them that it will be taken forward as part of the improvement plan. Una, would you like to pick up on that?

Ms Una Turbitt (Education Authority): Yes, we have been in contact with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) and arranged a meeting that will be held imminently. That will include a number of the senior team and the psychology service, which has a particular interest in making sure that the needs of children who are being educated through the medium of Irish are addressed. We take that very seriously.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Una. This is my last question, Chair. Sara, is enough help and advice coming from the Education Authority? You mentioned the 1,600 phone calls to the helpline. Is enough being provided by you over the summer to support parents? There will be more questions than answers, particularly over this period. Are you doing anything else over and above providing the helpline?

Ms Long: Cynthia, do you want to pick up on the communication with individual parents?

Ms Curry: The helpline has been ongoing since September and will continue over the summer months. Where we have needed to, we have diverted additional staff to the helpline. Time can then be taken with each caller so that it is not just a matter of getting through a certain number of calls. We have also tried to improve how parents communicate with link officers in the offices so that they can get updates on their child's circumstances. We continue to try to develop materials to make it clearer for parents who could be going through the earlier stages of the statementing process and to be proactive with the information that we give them.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Cynthia. Thank you, Chair. That is me finished.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Karen. Is Robin Newton still away?

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. William Humphrey, would you like to come in?

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you very much, ladies, for your presentation and for your time today.

I want to go back to the issue of young people and assessments. If I have picked you up right, Sara, you said that the average waiting time was now down to 40 weeks. Is that right?

Ms Long: No. I did not say what the average was; I said that the number of children who are waiting for over 40 weeks has now reduced.

Mr Humphrey: Right. What are the actual figures for children, as opposed to the number of weeks?

Ms Long: Sorry. In what regard, William?

Mr Humphrey: How many children are waiting over 40 weeks?

Ms Long: Cynthia, do you want to answer that?

Ms Curry: There has been a reduction of 61% in children waiting for over 40 weeks.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, but I want the number of children, Cynthia.

Ms Curry: The figure of 530 children waiting for 40-plus weeks has been reduced to 206.

Mr Humphrey: OK. You presented figures from November 2019 through to now.

Ms Curry: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: You also gave various percentages. Do the percentages address the figures that you have just given me?

Ms Curry: I am sorry. What is your question?

Mr Humphrey: When you quote percentages from November through to now, do they cover the reduction from 530 to 206 children?

Ms Curry: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: Right. In Northern Ireland, there are currently 206 children waiting for over 40 weeks.

Ms Curry: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: OK. How many children are there in total?

Ms Curry: There are currently 2,321 children in the system at different stages of the statutory assessment process.

Mr Humphrey: According to your figures, there has been an improvement in the number waiting for over 40 weeks. Have waiting times improved across the piece for all the children, at all levels?

Ms Curry: As we said, we have been focusing on the children for whom there is the longest wait, and there is no doubt that that is where we have made the most progress.

We have 1,724 children waiting for nought to 26 weeks, and we now need to start to focus on that area. We started with those with the longest wait, and we now need to look more closely at those waiting for nought to 26 weeks. In recognising how well we can deal with that, we have been carrying out a capacity-and-demand correlation.

Mr Humphrey: The attention has clearly been on those children waiting for over 40 weeks. You do not need me to tell you — I am sure that all members will agree, from listening to the people who come through their doors — that 26 weeks is a half a year. That is a long period of stress for those children and their families, teachers, principals, classroom assistants and so on. This is a hugely important and sensitive issue. Given the internal audit that was carried out, can more resource be found to address the issue, not just for those who have been waiting for over 40 weeks but in general?

Ms Long: Yes. The piece of work that Cynthia referred to, which is about our capacity as a service to deliver to our demand, is fundamental to that. We want to get a very clear sense of what resource we have and what the gap is to enable us systemically to continue to deliver against the 26-week target. We have started by looking at the current resource in the service, matching that to the demand and identifying the gap, and we will then have to bridge that gap.

Mr Humphrey: When we took evidence from the Children's Commissioner, I questioned her on an issue, so it is only fair that I question you on it, Sara. There are now regular meetings between the Education Authority and the Children's Commissioner, but, prior to those meetings, there had not been. Why is that?

Ms Long: I cannot comment on why there were no meetings previously. Since I came into post, we have held quarterly meetings involving me, the Children's Commissioner and the chief executive at NICCY. Since the audit of practice and the identification of issues, senior officers have been meeting monthly with NICCY's senior officers. We are therefore trying to ensure that we have ongoing communication at each and every level so that there is a straightforward and smooth flow of communication.

Mr Humphrey: Almost 300 children with special educational needs have not yet been placed. I have received some correspondence — we have taken this up with the Education Authority — about the placement of young people in north Belfast in particular. Are we making progress with those almost 300 children? That is hugely stressful for them and their families, and people do not need that stress over the summer.

Ms Long: I will ask Una to answer that.

Ms Turbitt: We take the placement of all children very seriously. It is a serious matter, as you indicated. It is highly challenging to secure places that are appropriate and that will meet the needs of each and every child. I want us to consult closely with parents and schools to make sure that we are securing places where the children will be happy and with which the parents will be happy, and I want us to put supports in place around those placements.

We are working with a number of schools, including schools in north Belfast, to try to increase their capacity. We are keeping in contact with parents on the progress that we are making. That is ongoing, and the numbers are changing day by day, but we have particular geographical challenges. Belfast is one such challenge. Newry is another, and we are working closely with the schools there. We are meeting DE officials and working with CCMS and area planning teams to do everything that we can to explore all options so that we can make real progress over the summer and get children placed as soon as possible.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you for that. The parents who have been contacting me — I am sure that they have been contacting other politicians — are very keen that their children be placed in Mercy Primary School.

Sara, you will be aware of the ongoing issues in north Belfast. I was speaking to Derek Baker earlier and have had conversations with Mark McBride and his team, who do great work. I have had meetings this week with, among others, the police and the council to discuss antisocial behaviour, sectarian attacks and so on emanating from parks. The police indicated to me that the lack of youth provision at the moment is a problem. They were not being critical. That is just the reality, because you have to comply, and have had to comply, with the COVID-19 regulations.

Youth Service provision for diversionary work, particularly at interfaces in North Belfast — it may apply to other constituencies, but I can speak about North Belfast only— is hugely important, and I ask you to bear that in mind.

Ms Long: Thank you, William.

Mr McCrossan: Sara, I welcome you and your colleagues back to the Committee after what has been a damaging lockdown period for schools, principals, parents and everybody in the wider education environment.

I have a number of points to raise. We are focusing on SEN today, but, before I move on to that, I must say that you will appreciate that it is vital that schools receive reassurance and communication from the EA. They look to you for guidance. I have had schools get in touch to say that that has not been forthcoming, not just from you but from the Department itself. I reiterate how important it is to keep the lines of communication open with those who need advice and guidance, particularly in these challenging times.

Your previous visit to the Committee was quite heated, rightly so, given what was at stake and what was being discussed. The details that were emerging into the public domain were very worrying. They were infuriating, in fact, for quite a lot of people. For a lot of people, however, the details came as a huge relief, because what emerged confirmed the real concerns that they had been sharing for a long time. Parents had felt voiceless for a long time. Unfortunately, the inaction — even action, to an extent — of the EA meant that that was allowed to happen and to continue to happen.

Sara, you are the new chief executive, and I understand that you need time to get settled in. I hope that you can provide us with the reassurance that the things that happened will not reoccur and that you will do everything possible in the organisation to give confidence to the public that the EA has learnt the lessons of the past. Some would argue that that is not the case just yet. I appreciate that a process needs to be followed.

The main difficulty that I have with the EA at present is that, from a public point of view, confidence in it is at an all-time low. When I say "public", I mean principals, teachers and parents. Confidence has been very damaged, and it will take a huge amount of work to reassure people and build up that confidence again.

At the heart of all of this, we are talking about children. Much as we talk about data and information, we are talking about young, vulnerable children and about families who have been left behind and who have felt ignored and isolated. I hope that the findings of not only the internal report but NICCY's report will be taken seriously and actions put in place, although I have concerns about the internal report.

I have a series of questions, Sara, if I can find where I have written them down. I want to follow on from what Chris said. What confidence can we have that the EA will keep tabs on how it performs? How can we provide reassurance that this will not happen again, that you have learnt from the past and that there are things now in place to ensure that there are proper checks done on all the processes?

Ms Long: Daniel, I will start and then bring in Cynthia. Fundamental to us and an absolute foundation of the change programme has to be communication with parents, school leaders, school practitioners and other stakeholders. We are absolutely committed to doing that. We understand that we need to do that and develop mechanisms for co-design so that we are not doing this to people but with people. That is fundamental and important to our success in delivering this.

We have identified a dedicated work stream. It is broader than communication and is about building public confidence and public trust. I will ask Cynthia to talk about that in a minute. I hope that the openness, honesty and transparency that we have demonstrated so far will give you some confidence that that is our culture and how we are committed to moving forward. Cynthia, do you want to say something about the work stream?

Ms Curry: From an operational point of view, it is crucial that we understand the data. We have developed performance metrics so that we are able to monitor how well we are doing on an ongoing basis.

It is also important that staff in offices are very much on top of the caseloads, and we have developed meetings and touchpoints for senior staff and other staff in their offices to check on progress. As I said, I am a firm believer in the idea that we will know whether we are doing well through our stakeholders. We are very open to hearing those views. They hold us to account and rightly so.

Mr McCrossan: It will be a long process, and it will not be easily solved. The key will be ensuring that mistakes are learned from and that the communication issues in the EA are sorted out, because there has been major criticism of the communication procedures in the EA. That is where the breakdown happened and continued to fester.

The report shows a significant planning-to-fail culture problem in the EA, with poor adherence to procedures, poor information controls and avoidable delays owing to:

"Staff sickness, cases overlooked or cases prematurely filed away."

It appears that staff often did not believe that the statutory timescales were achievable. How will the EA address those wider cultural issues? Is a fully independent review required for the statementing process and for the EA more generally so that the public can have confidence that it is fit for purpose?

Ms Long: I will ask Cynthia to talk about the work in the offices. On the question of a full independent review, we have identified areas for improvement. We have put in place a plan to improve them, and we are determined that we will do that. An independent review might be more appropriate at the end of the process to determine whether we have achieved the results that we set out to achieve. That is just my view.

Mr McCrossan: Sorry to interrupt before Cynthia comes in, but am I right in saying that, as chief executive, you are not against an independent review at the end of the process?

Ms Long: No, we are not.

Mr McCrossan: That will be critical in giving the public confidence in the EA again; it will be vital, in fact.

Ms Long: Earlier this year, we made contact with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). It runs a peer-review and challenge process, which is a well-known and evidence-based way of assessing services. We had progressed initial conversations with it. However, those conversations have stalled with everything else that has been going on, but that is something that we were exploring earlier in the year.

Mr McCrossan: OK. In the update, Sara, and thanks for the detail on this, you indicate that there has been an adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on your efforts to improve SEN statementing via your work streams. I would like to explore what that means for our children. Has the number of referrals for statements reduced? Has any part of the statementing process ceased or fallen behind? Has the mothballing of the DE transformation programme prevented the EA in any way from making much-needed improvements to information control or an SEN learner's journey?

Ms Long: Cynthia, do you want to pick up on the operational issue?

Ms Curry: Yes, absolutely. Picking up on your earlier point about culture and a culture of expectation, we are all aware that culture is how we do things day and daily. That is how we have been working with staff; we have an expectation that the service will deliver; we have an expectation that we will communicate with parents and do so openly; and we have expectation that children are absolutely at the centre of any agreed work. Therefore, those are the types of expectations that we have brought to the service and continue to bring to it.

On the operational side, you mentioned files being filed away and undue delays in offices. We have been looking at the current workflows in offices. We have not been able to explore those that are in an office environment as fully as we want to, given COVID-19, but, under lockdown, we have developed a regional workflow process so that staff could work remotely. We believe that there will be a lot of learning from that workflow process where staff are working at a regional level. We believe that that will help us when we get back into the office environment.

We absolutely cannot go back to those practices in offices. As I said, the regular meetings, regular touchpoints, regular looking at data and caseloads and regular case-by-case analysis of how children are being impacted will, hopefully, help us to address those issues.

Was there another question that I did not answer?

Mr McCrossan: I fired a series of questions at you. The Chair will stop me shortly, so I want to ask this important question: will the EA, as part of its improvement process, start to record other relevant timescales and put the time delay between recommendations for stage 3 support and their delivery and that between the statement being issued and the child receiving support? That is critical to building confidence in this process and system, and that is where it has been lacking. Can the EA advise how its performance in SEN statementing compares with that in other jurisdictions? That is a significant question as well. I am trying to determine whether we, in a Northern Ireland context, are failing our children more than others because of failures in the system or simply because of something that was systemic in the EA itself.

Ms Long: *[Inaudible]* piece of work that we will be doing in benchmarking ourselves against other jurisdictions on performance and resource and capacity to deliver the service. I would like that SEN analysis to be like a red/amber/green (RAG) analysis whereby I would understand how much resource other jurisdictions have to deliver their outcomes or to learn lessons if there are any identified bottlenecks that other jurisdictions have been able to manage better than we have in order to shorten the process. That is all part of it.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Finally, the NICCY report 'Too Little, Too Late' highlights many deficiencies in the EA's SEN provision. The thing about the NICCY report, Sara, is that there is language in it that NICCY does not traditionally use, like the word "failure". That report says clearly that children were failed, which is a very strong statement from the Children's Commissioner. What, in your opinion, are the greatest failings that the EA needs to address immediately, and how soon will you be able to review your plans to take these into account?

Ms Long: OK. Thank you, Daniel. We have tried to set out today some of our very immediate priorities. While we recognise that this is a complex area and that there are interlocking parts that we need to join together, it is important that we also recognise that we need to make immediate improvements. We believe that that is best done not only through analysis of the statutory operations process but through implementation of the NICCY recommendations. That will be our immediate focus.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Sara, Una and Cynthia. I am going to go out on a limb and thank you so much for how open you have been both in the previous meeting and today. I accept that you have inherited something that is quite horrendous in many ways. You have set out a plan to tackle many of the things that have been uncovered and tried to work in partnership with the Children's Commissioner and other bodies to address those shortcomings. Thank you for the update thus far. When I have communicated with you guys over the past two months, I have found you to be open, approachable and good at answering questions. I just want to put that on the record.

With regard to the scale of the problems, of which there are many, without picking out any of the issues that you are dealing with, are there any resources required now to achieve 100% compliance, which I hope is the goal of you and all of us? Dealing with the problems as is and dealing with the legacy is one thing, but to achieve the very best for vulnerable children in the future, we want to see 100% compliance. Are there any additional resourcing issues, whether that is personnel, new technology or whatever? Has that been identified? Maybe it has not; maybe the capacity exists. If it has been identified, has an ask been made of the Department for it?

Ms Long: Robbie, at this stage, we have a view that we will require additional resources to deliver this consistently and systemically as we move forward. We are working closely with the Department, and the Department will be a member of our project board. We have not yet been able to say explicitly what resource is required, and work is being undertaken over the summer to analyse that so that we really get behind the demand for this service and are able to put the capacity in place to deliver it on an ongoing basis. That is crucial work for us because it will determine what level of resource we will require.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that, Sara. If you can maintain openness and transparency with the Committee, we will do everything in our power to facilitate that because we want to put children with special educational needs and vulnerable children at the core of what we do.

I think it was William Humphrey who mentioned the 26-week wait; that might be a benchmark. If we deal with the legacy of the issues and come out the other side — I agree with William on that, because 26 weeks is half a year and seems like a long time — will that be the benchmark moving forward? I do not want to pre-empt any new report, but is that a reasonable time frame for people to be waiting for an assessment and for their plan?

Ms Long: The timescale will be reduced. Una, do you want to comment?

Ms Turbitt: As part of the 2016 SEND legislation, the timescale will be reduced, and that will create a further challenge. At this point, we are working towards the 26 weeks, but we are also mindful that we are preparing for a shortening to 20 weeks, which will be particularly challenging.

Going back to your question, we are going to need resources. I have no doubt about that. We can achieve efficiencies in how we do our business, and we need to make our processes really tight and

straightforward and take any duplication out of them. I have no doubt that we will need additional resources in order to achieve those goals.

Mr Butler: This is my last question. This might seem counter-intuitive, but I think Cynthia spoke a little bit about it. You guys embarked on this plan, COVID then came and thrust us into a different way of working and you have been trying to address the legacy issues through COVID. There may be some unintended consequences of working from home, as Cynthia talked about, and one issue that was previously identified was that different IT platforms were being used, people were recording things in a different way and some were not able to access information on assessments and so on. With regard to how you are working at the moment — I suppose that you will be doing a sense check on your plan — have you identified efficiencies? Cynthia might have answered that a minute or two ago. It might be something different. Have there been any learnt experiences through this process that have given us help or evidence to improve what we are trying to achieve?

Ms Curry: Absolutely. In the middle of this horrendous pandemic, there are some positives. I mentioned that we have regional workflows in process. Working online has meant that staff need to be more consistent in the use of the management information systems, and that will be really useful when we return to normality. One of the by-products is that we realise that multidisciplinary working is required across services and across Departments, and our new world of Teams and Zoom enables us to do that much more quickly. We have found that, when making some of the decisions in the more complex cases, it has been easier to get people around the table to have discussions and to make the best provision for children. Yes, there have definitely been efficiencies in time, and I do not think that we will ever quite go back to how we worked before.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that, Cynthia. We are in danger of catastrophising everything in the COVID pandemic, but some learning and efficiencies are going to come out of it. Thank you very much.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks, Cynthia, Sara and Una, for your presentation. Any time that I have made contact with the EA in the last few months in relation to SEN, communication has improved significantly from where it was this time last year, so thank you for that.

What authority does EA have when schools informally exclude children with SEN or reduce their teaching hours? The exclusion of pupils with special educational needs from education, whether it is permanent or temporary, has a detrimental impact on their academic development. Can EA investigate the frequency of those informal measures and introduce a formal register as well as appropriate oversight and a mechanism to allow parents to appeal any decision to deny or limit access to education for their child?

Ms Curry: I will ask Una to pick that one up.

Ms Turbitt: You are, obviously, raising a very serious issue. We do not have the data; as it stands, we do not know how many children are excluded and to what extent, but we know that there are children who are being informally excluded. We need to look at that, and, as Cynthia said, we need to understand why that is happening, who those children are, whether it is because of their behaviour, and how we support schools to cope with the needs of children in class. Having said that, we have a responsibility to understand where children are and whether they are getting access to the education that they are entitled to. It is the right of children to be in school, and that school should be able to accommodate their needs.

I have asked the educational welfare service to start working on that over the summer, so that, in September, there will be discussions with all of the school principals to look at the issue. Each of the schools will have a dedicated educational welfare officer, who will look at the overall attendance of school pupils. Obviously, that will be particularly challenging because of restart and what needs to happen in that regard, but we need to get a better handle on it so that we can monitor it and put in place the provisions that are needed to reduce the time that children are spending out of school; they are missing out on their education.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks for that, Una. I think that it will reassure some that work is ongoing in that regard, especially the many parents who are in contact weekly during term time with issues such as that.

How can the Education Authority restore confidence among schools and parents — another member touched on this earlier — who have been battling through the statementing process for years, many of

whom were too late in receiving the crucial support that may have made a significant difference to their child's life?

Ms Turbitt: It is right at the centre of what we want to do in terms of this change. It is about communication, openness and transparency. It is about working directly with parents, young people and our key stakeholder groups and hearing their views and experiences [*Inaudible*] that that informs what we do. Cynthia, do you want to pick up on some of the work stream 7?

Ms Curry: As I said earlier, work stream 7 is, for me, the most important one. We need to realise that this is a huge issue. We all need to work as a team. No one part of our education system will do this alone. It is about working with parents and children and hearing their voice. It is about working with not just school principals but pastoral staff on a day-to-day basis. It is also about working openly with the Department of Education, you — the Committee — and wider stakeholders. We realise that there is a long way to go. We are aware of the communication issues that there have been, but we are determined that we will try our best to make this better. We are determined to try to build that confidence. We cannot do it alone. We will do it as a team, and we hope that we get that sense of co-design and team. We are open to change.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, all.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Una, I will supplement one of Catherine's question. Does the Education Authority need legislation to enable it to require schools to record data with regard to informal exclusion?

Ms Turbitt: Legislation in relation to attendance exists. It could be strengthened through regulations, but that is a matter for the Department. We would be happy to get involved in those discussions.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Sara, Una and Cynthia for coming to the Committee meeting. I do not doubt your integrity, determination, commitment and motivation in addressing the issues that are being discussed today. Taking a helicopter view, what has been the number-one barrier to service delivery, historically? Has it been the organisational structure, poor communications, systemic issues, use of data or processes, collaboration, governance or culture?

Ms Long: I am not sure that there is one single issue, Justin, and that is probably part of what makes this so complex. That is why we have been so clear that we have to address all of the interlocking issues. If we tackle only one, we will not get the change and the success that we want. We have tried to set out the fact that we will deal with each of the issues, because it has been a combination of issues that has contributed to us being where we are.

Mr McNulty: All of you have mentioned culture. Is culture the one overriding issue — the issue that encapsulates the other interweaving issues?

Ms Long: If we do not get the culture right, the rest of it will not deliver our expectations and the culture of how we do things, as Cynthia said. Yes, there is no doubt about it: structural or process reform will not be sustainable if we do not put the right culture in place.

Mr McNulty: So, culture is the one overarching issue at play?

Ms Long: It is a fundamental issue. We could work hard on the culture of the organisation, but if we do not get the necessary resources, for example, to deliver, we will not make the changes.

Mr McNulty: From what I have heard, it sounds as though the culture is a major part of it. I am concerned that culture is not mentioned in the work streams. All of you have talked about culture and have said that it has to change. How are you addressing cultural change in the organisation? If it is not in your work streams and is not being assessed and addressed, how will it change? For me, if you are not assessing, you are guessing. How can you say that you will change the culture if you are not assessing or addressing it and it is not part of the work streams?

Ms Turbitt: I agree with you. Culture is critical; it underpins everything that we do and everything that we are trying to achieve. It is probably an umbrella term, but it is critical. Along with Cynthia and Sara, I have been out meeting the staff and exploring the notion of culture and what it is like for them to work

in statutory operations, considering the complexity of the work and the pace at which they work daily. We are clear that there needs to be an openness externally and within our organisation and in the services that we provide. We are telling our administration staff that they need to talk to us and to share their concerns and issues, but we also need to celebrate their successes and what they are achieving on a day-by-day basis. We are very clear about transparency internally and externally.

I have been in contact with Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), which is an umbrella organisation that has links with the voluntary and community sector. I have been talking to it about how it can help us to engage externally with parents and families and to learn from lived experience. That is a really important part of our culture, day and daily. It is about respect for ourselves and how we, as senior leaders, respect our staff and behave in the way that we want others to behave in how they deal with parents, children and schools. It is also about a culture of efficiency, effectiveness and making sure that we have our eye on the ball and that we are making a difference in a positive way that will achieve the outcomes for children and young people. I have and encourage an open-door policy throughout the teams. We need to be talking to and learning from each other. All that cultural shift will help us to achieve the goals and vision that we so passionately desire.

Mr McNulty: I encourage you to put culture more front and centre, as nothing will change if it is only on the fringes of the conversation. It needs to be addressed and assessed on a continual basis and worked on. It will not happen by accident; it has to be really focused on.

I know that you are all very determined and committed, and I wish you luck with the major challenges going forward. Thank you very much, ladies.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is Maurice there? There he is. Maurice, you appear to be muted. Go ahead.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you Sara, Una and Cynthia for your frank answers so far. We heard in April how poor the service was with the SEN backlog and how bad the existing service records were. How is the review of the existing records being dealt with? The service was also identified as a reactive rather than a proactive service that appeared to be without manageable time frames. Several times today you referenced the new matrix system and a new system of working. What improvements have those achieved to date?

Ms Curry: The improvements can be seen in our performance data and feedback. For each child that we get a positive outcome for, the third outcome is, for me, the most important part of what we have achieved.

You mentioned some of the aspects of the service that are linked to in-office environment working. While we had started that process before COVID-19, we have not been able to explore it as fully as we want to. As I referenced, we have put in place workflow processes. There is a definite move to explore more digital processes and to get a digital system that helps us to track and reduce the amount of paper that we have in the offices and to have a more respectful digital solution for exploring with our parents, for referrals to come in or for communication to go back and forward. We have not gone the full way; we have lots more to do, but we believe that we are on that road and that we can show some improvement.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much for that. Justin alluded to culture. Part of the culture change that I would like to see initiated would be proactive as opposed to reactive. However, you touched on the offices, and I know that you visited all five sites. Is there a process in place to introduce hardware and software across all offices that means that the sharing of data and files and possibly the reduction of paper files is possible?

Ms Turbitt: Yes, absolutely. As one member referenced, we have made great strides in that. All of us have been forced to use digital more often. We have managed to take a very paper-driven, administrative-heavy service and provide it through remote working, and that has required us to ensure that files are digitally held. We are under no illusions that our management information system can be better. Therefore, we are exploring a range of digital options to make it better and more bespoke to the service.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much for that. With your permission, Chair, I have one more question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: Psychology respondents indicated that they need 50% more time to make assessments, which currently take, on average, 40 days to 50 days. They also quoted a possible conflict in their professional autonomy and questioned whether resources were a constraint to recommended interventions. What increasing finance do you feel is needed to improve psychology assessments as part of the SEN process?

Ms Turbitt: Psychology is one of those interdependencies that I talked about that is related to the statutory assessment process. It is fundamental that the two services work well together. We mentioned that we need to look at capacity and demand and that we need to be able to identify clearly where resources are. The psychology service, as one of the fundamental interdependent parts of this process, is also part of that.

Mr M Bradley: OK. Thank you very much. That is me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Maurice. I will briefly follow up on that question. The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.3) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 reduces a range of obligations on the Education Authority from a statutory duty to "best endeavours". I believe that that includes the statutory assessment process. The modification states that the Education Authority has inadequate resources for the statutory assessment of SEN and that the education psychology service has suspended face-to-face statutory assessment. What has been the impact of that modification?

Ms Long: Cynthia, will you take "best endeavours" on SEN, and, Una, will you cover psychology?

Ms Curry: In our "best endeavours" with the statutory statementing process, we have taken the approach that we are trying to work as much as we can as though it is business as usual. As mentioned by the chief executive, the statutory assessment process and the statutory operation service were named as critical services. We therefore had a corporate approach to making sure that, as much as possible, it was business as usual.

There absolutely will be delays from, for example, Health in these difficult times, but we are not using "best endeavours" as the main stalwart of what we are doing. We are trying to make it business as usual. For us, "best endeavours" in the statutory assessment process has meant that we have had to change some of our practices, but we are trying hard not to let that delay us, where we can control it, where it is in our control and where we are not awaiting advice. We need to make sure that we are progressing the things that are within our control as best we can.

There absolutely will be issues with the advice that is coming forward, and we need to get better at recording it. Our data do not show us the actual recording percentage at the minute. We want to get better at recording where the delays are coming from in other services. We can control a lot in our assessment process, and we have continued to try to do that in a business-as-usual way in very difficult circumstances.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I just want to check the total number of children who are waiting longer than six months for a statutory assessment. Is it 1,724 or 1,224? Did I pick that up wrong?

Ms Curry: There are 1,724 children in the nought-to-26-week bracket. There are 597 children waiting 26-plus weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So there are 597 outside the statutory limit: is that correct?

Ms Curry: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is helpful. Thank you.

Officials, I have a final quick set of questions. How many children with statements are currently unplaced for September 2020?

Ms Turbitt: At this point, it is 285 children.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. How many children with statements who are seeking special school places are unplaced for 2020?

Ms Turbitt: There are 123 children in the primary school bracket. There are 33 in the post-primary bracket.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How does that compare with this stage of the year in other years?

Ms Turbitt: It is difficult to know, because we do not have that exact data. However, I have spoken to the heads of service who were involved in that last year, and they are saying that they are just as busy. They were extremely busy at this point last year. However, their concern is in making sure that the capacity is there. That is the issue, and that is why we are meeting the Department tomorrow to try to increase that capacity. At this point, it is probably similar, but it is clearly a challenge that we have to take forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so that is 156 children with statements seeking special school places who are unplaced, out of a total of 285.

Ms Turbitt: That is right.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So slightly more than 50% of those children with statements who are unplaced are seeking placements in special schools.

Ms Turbitt: That is right.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What has gone so wrong with area planning that so many children are left unplaced at this stage of the year?

Ms Long: Chris, the area planning team is currently working to develop a framework to move the special schools area planning agenda forward. That is a framework that will be available for consultation in the first instance so that we can begin to progress the special schools area planning agenda with more haste. We are keen to do that collaboratively and with full consultation, hence the development of the consultation paper.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is probably something that we will need to come back to.

Related to that, will children with delays in receiving statements be given additional support to help them to progress as they wait for their statements, or do they need that statement to be in place to access additional resources?

Ms Turbitt: No, they do not need a statement to access resources. We have a range of pupil support services. They are accessible, and should be accessible. We are very committed to achieving earlier intervention. That means that you should not need to have a statement to get the support that you need to meet your needs.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Just coming back to the 156 pupils who do not have special school places for September, do you have a timescale for when you think those 156 pupils will be placed?

Ms Turbitt: We are dealing with that as a matter of urgency. It is a challenge. We are working with special school principals and others to increase capacity, but clearly that is something that we will need time to work through.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Is there a lack of special school places in Northern Ireland, or in particular areas of Northern Ireland?

Ms Turbitt: Yes. There is clearly a need for additional special school places throughout the region. It is important that we look at it from the child's perspective. We need to work closely with our area planning colleagues to make sure that we can identify where those places should be to allow children to be educated in special schools that are in, or as close as possible to, their communities.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If you know, or the system knows, that there is a lack of special school places, how has that situation been allowed to develop?

Ms Turbitt: I am not sure whether I can answer that one.

Ms Long: It is difficult to comment on how we arrived at that place. We are committed to resolving the issue as best we can. We did make a commitment that we would have a collaborative approach to placing children with statements this year, because we got criticism last year that it had not been collaborative. It is clear that we need to get the balance between understanding parents' and children's needs for certainty, along with ensuring that they get the right placement for children and the right children in the right schools to meet their needs.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is there any risk that any of those pupils will not have a special school place in September?

Ms Long: It is difficult to say that at this point. I think that we will know better once we have planned the provision for the additional capacity. If we can get a good sense out of our meeting with the Department of Education tomorrow around what additional capacity might be available, we will be in a better place to answer that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Committee would be grateful for an update, further to that meeting, in relation to this urgent issue.

Ms Long: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Scheduling may not allow that to be an oral update. We can reflect on that with the Clerk, but we would certainly appreciate a written update.

Ms Long: We will provide that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When I asked you if there was a risk that any of those pupils would not have a place in a special school in September, your answer was not "No", which is slightly concerning. As I say, we would be grateful for an update further to that meeting.

One other brief issue. In terms of mainstream support for pupils with special educational needs, the learning support units are very important. When I spoke to you previously, you said that there were 31 learning support units in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. It is yet possible to advise on the breakdown of the type of schools that those 31 units are in?

Ms Turbitt: I do not have that with me, but it is information that we could get for you, if that would be helpful.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That would be appreciated, Una. That would be great. Thank you.

That is all our questions for today. I welcome the offer of ongoing engagement on these serious issues. I look forward to an update from you with regard to that meeting tomorrow on special school placement. We can come back to you on whether there will be a need for further oral briefings at this stage. Thank you very much for your briefings today.