



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Special Educational Needs:
Education Authority

15 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr William Humphrey (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Ms Órlaithí Flynn
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Maolíosa McHugh
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr Matthew O'Toole

Witnesses:

Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Sara Long	Education Authority
Ms Una Turbitt	Education Authority
Mr Kieran Donnelly	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I welcome to the meeting Ms Sara Long, the chief executive of the Education Authority (EA), and Ms Una Turbitt, the Education Authority's interim director for children and young people. You know how this works: after your opening statement, members will ask questions. It is over to you.

Ms Sara Long (Education Authority): OK, Chair. Thank you very much. I want to say that we fully accept the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report. We welcome the fact that it validates our internal audit of practice that was carried out in November 2019 and that it builds on the report from the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner. I have been clear from the outset that this is not an acceptable standard of service delivery, and I have apologised for that. We have put in place an immediate action plan to make some priority improvements, and we are also developing an overarching programme approach to ensuring that the recommendations of all those reports can be met promptly. We will do that alongside our key stakeholders, our children and parents.

Mr Hilditch: You are very welcome this afternoon. The report is very concerning for a layperson. Having gone through the report and looked at it, together with other knowledge in the area that has been provided within these four walls, I see that the overview is that — this is going back some time — there was poor leadership and governance. There appeared to be a blame culture and approach. There was an old Civil Service culture of living from day to day, week to week, just to get by. There was also a failure to deal with change. As I said, even within the four walls of this Building, I have heard on a number of occasions that there was potential bullying. What do you say to those kinds of

allegations? I know that you are trying your best to move forward, but those issues have been thrown out there. What way do you take them? What do you say to them?

Ms Long: The audit of practice that the EA conducted in November 2019 identified a range of issues in how staff were working day-to-day. As a result of that, it was found that it was difficult for staff to manage in a proactive way, so it was often done in a reactive way. It talked about examples of good practice being based on individual members of staff who were doing their best despite the circumstances. It talked about a lack of accountability and performance culture in the services.

Mr Hilditch: Does that not warrant an independent investigation or an overview of the situation in the EA?

Ms Long: As investigation has commenced in the EA.

Mr Hilditch: Is it independent?

Ms Long: It is being overseen by a board committee, and the investigation —

Mr Hilditch: An EA board committee?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Hilditch: It is not independent, then.

Ms Long: It is being undertaken by two independent investigators.

Mr Hilditch: I will go on to some of the specifics. On the decision-making on a statement, there were long delays over time, and there are some horrific figures. Can you tell us how the process works, step by step, and who makes the final decision?

Ms Long: OK. I will ask Una to answer that.

Ms Una Turbitt (Education Authority): We have to stay within a code of practice. There are different steps. The first step is that a child is identified as potentially having a special educational need (SEN). That can initially be addressed in the school as part of stage 1 or stage 2. The stage 3 part of the code is where the school uses whatever resources it has in that setting to meet the child's needs. If there is concern that the child's needs cannot be met in the school setting, a referral is made to the statutory operations team in the Education Authority. The referral comes in at that point. A decision is then made on whether or not a statutory assessment will be conducted. If that is the case, a range of professionals will provide advices to the statutory operations team. From that, a decision is made on the nature of the statement, what is in that statement and how the child's needs can be met.

Mr Hilditch: Who makes the final decision on a statement? Is it a committee or a board?

Ms Turbitt: It is done by the statementing team. An officer is assigned to each case, and he or she will look at all the advices coming in. There will be advice from educational psychologists, who play a particular role in that they outline very clearly what the child's needs are and make recommendations as to the type of provision that the child will need. Other advices will come in from a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and paediatricians. All that advice is then taken into consideration and a statement is drafted. From that, a decision is made about the actual provision. It very much depends on the advice that comes in from those professional groups.

Mr Hilditch: "Team" is the word that I was looking for. It is not like it was in the old education and library boards, where there were five decision-making groups. That created inconsistency throughout Northern Ireland. Are you happy that there is more consistency now?

Ms Turbitt: We certainly have a road to go to achieve consistency. However, recently, we put a process in place for the statutory operations teams so that all five offices are doing exactly the same and adhering to the same standards.

Mr Hilditch: That is good. The other issue relates to appeals, for which there are some fairly worrying figures. You were hoping for around 50%, but it turned out to be a much higher figure. Surely, to have that level of appeals, something is wrong systemically. I think that you have quite a high percentage of appeals before they even get to the hearings stage. What is going on there? Does that not point us in the direction of what is really going on?

Ms Long: Again, the appeals issue was highlighted by our audit of practice in 2019. It highlighted concerns about the number and percentages of appeals that were conceded. It recommended that a lessons learned exercise be undertaken.

Mr Hilditch: Appeals have trebled in the past two or three years: they have gone from 145 to 408.

Ms Long: We are trying to understand the trends. We need to understand the trends and the systemic reasons for them. What you said is absolutely right.

Mr Hilditch: I have just found the figures here, and you have conceded 68%. Again, that points to a worrying question about what is really going on.

Ms Long: We are reviewing that as part of the overall improvement plan for the statutory operations service that was developed immediately after the audit of practice and will form part of our overarching programme approach. There is no doubt that we need to understand why that is happening, the trend behind it, and how we stop it from happening.

Mr Hilditch: Did the report draw your attention to that, or were you aware of it previously?

Ms Long: The audit of practice that we undertook drew our attention to it. However, the report certainly confirmed and reinforced that view for us.

Mr Hilditch: The action that you are taking is on the back of that report?

Ms Long: We are taking further action on the back of the report.

Mr Hilditch: You are taking action on the back of the report, so you were not doing anything prior to the report.

Ms Long: No, we were doing some things. On the back of the audit of practice in 2019, we were undertaking a lessons learned exercise. However, we need to go further on the back of this report.

Mr Hilditch: Looking at the figures, I think that you definitely need to go further.

I understand that, in September 2019, the National Audit Office (NAO) in England published a report on SEN, which highlighted significant concerns about SEN provision throughout local authorities in England. What comparisons have been done by the Education Authority in relation to some of the common issues with SEN provision that have been identified in other jurisdictions?

Ms Long: When I came into post in April 2019, the board was keen that we would understand that and try to learn from other jurisdictions. During 2019, I had commenced conversations with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). It represents all the local authorities and undertakes peer reviews for special educational needs services. Peer review is a well-known, well-understood and evidence-based review in which officers from local authorities in England come over and review our services in a clearly set out and defined way. Officers from the EA then join review teams in England.

Mr Hilditch: Did the English authorities give you a report on what they had seen?

Ms Long: It has not taken place yet. Those discussions were not completed. Originally, we had a date set for April 2020. Obviously, that could not go forward. In truth, I have not progressed any further discussions about picking that up until we are in a position to do something.

Mr Hilditch: Are you aware of systemic issues that are being reported in Northern Ireland that are common in other areas?

Ms Long: There are some issues that are common, and some that we need to address ourselves. We need to attend to issues of process etc. Some of the common issues are around need, the identification of need, delivery of services at the early intervention stage and the statementing process itself in order to make it a more child-centred and less administrative process.

Mr Hilditch: Are there common issues in Northern Ireland that are reflected in other areas?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Hilditch: Yes?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr Hilditch: Will you not elaborate on that?

Ms Long: As I said, they are around processing and the identification of need and also the ability to demonstrate outcomes at a population level. England has just commissioned a longitudinal study on that, and the Republic of Ireland has also commenced one.

Mr Hilditch: Chair, I will leave it there. I have other questions, but I do not want to hog them all, and other members have questions.

Mr Muir: I thank you for coming here today in the midst of everything else and the challenges that schools and the Education Authority are facing. It is appreciated. I joined the Public Accounts Committee just recently, and I was reading through the current Northern Ireland Audit Office report on special educational needs and the previous one. Sadly, I have to say that its findings were no surprise to me because I have met the parents and young people who have been affected by this. I appreciate that you came into the post of chief executive relatively recently, but I have had dealings with the Education Authority over many years, and — I do not say this lightly — I have found it to be the most dysfunctional organisation that I have ever encountered. I understand that there is a corner to be turned, but what has happened, and what the findings from these reports make clear, is that children and young people have been failed. I am looking for an assurance from you that you are confident that a corner is being turned, particularly on how you get a statement at stage 3. One finding states that there is a real backlog there. What efforts are being made to address that?

Ms Long: I am absolutely determined that we will make improvements in this area in particular and in other areas. It is a priority for me, for our corporate leadership team and for our board, which fully supports and endorses what we are doing. Yes, I can give you an assurance that we are turning a corner. I think that we have a way to go. Some of these issues, as you have described, are systemic in nature. It will take us some time, and it may take additional resource to get to the point where we need to be. I do not underestimate that either, but we are turning a corner. We need to start with benchmarking those services at stage 3 and really understanding the current demand for those services, our capacity to meet them and how children access those services. That has to be our starting point with stage 3. I know from what schools tell me that, at the minute, unmet need is held at school level. I am not yet sure that we have a complete picture about what the actual need is and, therefore, what capacity we may need to resolve that. We also need to continue our work with the statutory operations piece. That is a statutory requirement and is not an either/or, as Una reminds me all the time. We need to ensure that we do both, but we have to start with understanding the need for services at stage 3 because I do not believe that we have that full picture yet.

Mr Muir: I understand and appreciate that. Are there timescales for this? This is the issue about which parents and young people have come to me. When will we turn that corner? When will we see the change so that we will not have another Audit Office report saying that some recommendations have not been implemented? When will things be fit for purpose? That is the aspiration that we all want to move towards?

Ms Long: As I said, we have an immediate improvement plan in place. That is very much based around the statutory operations and the office processes and how we can move those forward. On our programme approach, we are establishing a stakeholder reference group because I, like you, have heard the negative feedback, and I believe that we need to build and restore the confidence of the system in the organisation and in the services that we provide. We are very keen to develop this programme with our stakeholders and to do that through co-design. The timescales and development

of the full plan are not yet complete because we want to do that as a co-designed piece of work. We hope that the work will be completed by the end of this year, but that does not mean that work will not continue with the immediate improvement plan that is in place. It is important to us to start to rebuild our relationships with parents and stakeholders and to regain their confidence.

Ms Turbitt: We found ourselves in a difficult situation in which so many children were waiting so long for their statements to be issued and their provision to be put in place. That is the ultimate goal when supporting children. In the last six months, we have made significant inroads into reducing waits that are longer than 26 weeks, taking into consideration that the data that we are presenting to the Committee includes the valid exceptions, which we do not take into account when we give you that information. We know that it is a challenging target, but we hope to meet the 26-week target, including the valid exceptions, by the end of March. I caution that it is a stretching target, but we are absolutely committed to delivering the 26-week target.

As you said, it is about listening to parents and making sure that we are working with them to get the right provision in place for the children who desperately need it.

Mr Muir: I have one more question, and I am conscious that other members also have questions. How confident are you that the valid exceptions are valid? It is a concern that "valid exception" is used as a way to evade the target. I understand that the EA is part of a jigsaw, and the Department of Education is a key part of this, as are parts of the health service. How confident are you that the other parts of the jigsaw will support you?

Ms Long: The valid exceptions have been removed from the figures that we are reporting as our percentage compliance against the 26-week standard. They are raw figures, if you like. We did not have confidence in the valid exception process, and we could not use the information to manage the service and track children in the most appropriate way. Work is now under way to make sure, as we say in shorthand, that the valid exceptions really are valid. We hope to be able to apply the valid exceptions data again before the end of this calendar year. However, it results in a deterioration of our performance against the percentage of the 26-week standard. At this point, this is the only true way to be able to improve the service rather than chase enhanced performance targets. The service has to be about what we do for the children who are waiting the longest times. We have made a very clear and deliberate decision about the valid exceptions.

In the previous evidence session, Ricky described the good working relationship that we have with the health sector. Certainly, COVID has enhanced that working relationship for us. The 2019 audit of practice picked up that valid exceptions were being applied while the EA was waiting for health advices, but we were not proactively following up on those health advices. It was seen that, although there was a valid exception for health, it was not for us to attend to, but it most certainly was for us to attend to. Both the EA and health have a responsibility in that space. Again, we are working with health on the matter. Currently, education and health are meeting twice a week and covering a full range of issues.

Mr O'Toole: It emerged from the report that the EA did not have a dedicated team that had clear ownership of addressing the findings of the 2017 report. Does that chime with your experiences at the time you took over?

Ms Long: The SEN implementation team was in place, and it addressed a number of the recommendations around training etc, but there was not a dedicated improvement team to take forward the recommendations.

Mr O'Toole: There obviously is now.

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: One of the broader questions that we asked the Department, in the previous session, was around the financial sustainability of special educational needs in the context of the overarching Education budget in Northern Ireland. From your perspective, how much do resource constraints play in what you have acknowledged to be a suboptimal service?

Ms Long: There is no doubt that resource constraints have played a part. However, other areas have also played a part in creating that suboptimal service. I do not think that is a question of either/or; it is

both. There are internal processes that we must address. At this stage, if we do not even fully understand what the demand for our service is, it is difficult for us to be assured that we have the correct and appropriate resource to meet that demand. That is why it is very important that we really get a handle on that.

Mr O'Toole: You have already touched on this: one of the other structural things is around the management of information. Some of that seems to stem from the transition from the old education and library boards to a unified Education Authority. I have two questions. First, can you explain your view on the management of information, how bad is it, or how bad was it, and what is being done to address that? Secondly, are there outstanding challenges in specific legacy offices or areas from the old education and library boards? For example, are there bits of Northern Ireland where the information on special educational need is collected and managed less well than in other areas? The first question is about how bad it is, and the second is about what areas are still doing badly, or doing the worst.

Ms Long: We now have one regional management information system. What the Education Authority lacks is data analytics and expertise around that system. We also suffered from the 2019 audit of practices; it described staff as working in very difficult environments and managing multiple pressures. In that sort of environment, you find that the rigour around data may not always be there. It has been a combination of the rigour on input, the absence of any meaningful data analytics within the Education Authority and not having a defined and clear performance framework, through which that management of information could be fed and reviewed.

Mr O'Toole: Are any specific geographies doing badly?

Ms Long: I would not say geographies; I would say service areas. The Audit Office report highlighted that, in stage 3 services, for example, it is not clear that we have a consistent and rigorous approach to data management, data quality and data input.

Mr O'Toole: You talked about data analytics expertise, but one of the specific things that came out, which we discussed with the Audit Office, was that the problem was as basic as data input; some areas were using Excel and others were using Sage or something else. Is that being addressed?

Ms Long: Yes, it is being addressed. It certainly has been addressed at the statutory operations phase. As Una has described, COVID has allowed us to take that further again. It is now the stage 3 services that I feel we need to get into with the same level of rigour and ensure that we have the same level of consistent data and data quality.

Mr O'Toole: I have one final point to make, if I may. You mentioned a lack of data analytics expertise. Does that mean that there are, as it were, too many generous managers who may be very able and diligent but are without specific data analytics training, or are you looking for data scientists to come to work in the EA? What is the specific expertise that you want and how are you going to get it?

Ms Long: OK. At this point, some of the expertise that has been developed has been in individual directorates and, therefore, is not necessarily delivering in a corporate and consistent way. The first stage for us is to ensure that the staff in our various directorates can come together collectively and corporately and then decide what training we might need for them. It is a difficult balance to strike, as everyone commented earlier. We know how stretched budgets are, especially budgets to schools, so, in that context, I do not wish to start to seek to recruit and build a large corporate centre, but I need to find a way, using the resources and expertise that I have, to maximise that. That will probably come about through identification and delivery of further training.

Mr O'Toole: I have one more point, Chair.

You said that you do not want to build a big corporate centre. Do you have a general concern that too much management responsibility in the EA is still devolved to regions? Would you like more strategic management authority at the centre?

Ms Long: I would prefer fewer regions and more directorates. It was mentioned earlier that that was in some of the feedback. A huge criticism of the Education Authority is that it works in five silos of directorates that do not communicate well with each other or with others. I am working towards building a more corporate oversight of the Education Authority through our corporate leadership team

and our corporate governance arrangements and framework. We must, by default, work across directorates and have a clear corporate message around that. We must look at our information in that way as well, rather than in silos. When we look at our information in silos, we are making decisions only on the basis of that information for that particular directorate and not right across.

Mr McHugh: You are very welcome today. The 2017 report made 10 recommendations that were not implemented. At that time, a progress board was set up which, I think, is still in existence. Is it?

Ms Long: Yes.

Mr McHugh: Whilst you have accepted that there are, in fact, deficiencies in the service at present, will that same board address the recommendations in the latest report?

Ms Long: The programme board that was set up around the 2017 report was a DE-led board. I am putting an overarching programme board in place in the Education Authority to make sure that the recommendations of the full range of reports that have come forward in the last year are all implemented. There are now so many recommendations, many of which interlink and overlap, so we have to make sure that we have the right approach to all of that. As chief executive, I will chair and be the senior responsible officer (SRO) of that programme board in the EA, so that I can be assured that the recommendations are being completed in as fulsome a way as possible and that I can demonstrate that.

I have no doubt that some of that will take time, but again, if we know how long we think it is going to take, and we can chart our milestones along the way, that will be very important. We must begin to demonstrate improvement and not just talk about it. We have to be able to show it.

Mr McHugh: It is very good to hear that we are talking about delivery rather than just saying, "OK. Aye, we know that the problem is there". We are right down to some of the more personalised situations that one deals with as an MLA, councillor or representative of the general public. In schools, at present, there is a quota for the number of children that can be referred to the educational psychologist. That is to be done away with; is that right?

Ms Long: That is certainly going to be reviewed. It is the time allocation model, and that featured heavily in the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner's report. That is a part of our overarching programme. We will have to review the time allocation model and, if I may go back to my earlier point, the identification of unmet need. That need is currently held at school level, and I am not sure how we would ever be in a position to design our services to sufficiently meet it if we do not know what it is. Una, do you want to come in here?

Ms Turbitt: The educational psychologist team are certainly keen to look at the model that they are using. Children who require statements are being seen. The issue seems to be in Key Stage 3, where there are children to whom psychologists need to give support and advice, but the demand exceeds the ability of psychologists to meet it. That being said, we need to look at how educational psychologists are working and whether there are other things that they are involved in that they might allow others to do. For example, they may be acting as special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), teachers or performing other services within the EA team. They are looking at that at the minute, and they are conscious that there has been significant criticism in relation to their time allocation model. In fairness, the time allocation model was set up to try to spread the resource that they have across the region, but it has been difficult.

Mr McHugh: It also gives rise to the type of common complaint that I am faced with, which is about how schools choose who is sent to the psychologist. In some cases, it is believed by parents, rightly or wrongly, that schools have a vested interest in not having children referred to the psychologist. We talk about the importance of early intervention. It is so important that we have that facility for all children with special educational needs, so that they are identified at an early stage.

Are we reassured, in implementing a new system, that all children with special educational needs will be catered for in that situation?

Ms Long: I am not sure that we can say that all will be catered for. That is also resource dependent. I would like to know what that need is and what the gap in the resource is. Without knowing that, I cannot articulate that to the Committee, or say that, "All needs could be met if I had an additional

resource of x or y." To get to that point, it is really important that we understand what that need is. That is something I have heard so many times from schools. How can we even try to design and build services to meet the need, when most of that is held at school level, and we do not know what it is?

Mr McHugh: I will make a statement, rather than ask a question. Mothers, in particular, often know before the child even gets the length of the school whether that there is a need. That happens whether or not the primary school can make provision or has the facility to make it. If anything, it might create a situation that might not be in the school's interest, but the resources need to be assured to the school so that it can deliver before a statement arrives in the first instance. What do you think of that comment?

Ms Long: That is early intervention at its best.

Ms Turbitt: All the evidence points towards early intervention. It is not just early intervention in relation to individual children but the whole class. We need to take a whole-school and whole-class approach. We see a significant number of children who have statements because they have social and emotional behaviour issues. We know that one of the best ways to support those children is to do it as part of a class where their peers are involved in the intervention. That is not to say that we should not work with particularly challenging difficulties; we need to be able to target those children with additional interventions, but we need to know that the interventions are evidence-based and likely to work, and we need to get them in as early as possible. I will reiterate that the nurture programme is a really significant step forward in early intervention, and I look forward to supporting the implementation of the programme.

Mr McHugh: Finally, the inspectorate is probably the only way to make an evaluation of how effective a policy is within a particular school, and to ensure that the needs of all the children are met prior to being stated or whatever in relation to special needs.

Ms Turbitt: We will welcome the return of the inspectorate to business so we can get the evaluation undertaken.

Mr McHugh: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Earlier, you said that you were appointed in April 2019, so you have been in post for 18 months. When did you become aware of the serious SEN situation in the EA?

Ms Long: I took up the post in April 2019. I had been the director of operations and estates within the Education Authority since April 2016. Certainly, in my capacity as the director of operations and estates, and since taking up the post in 2019, I have met school leaders, parents and stakeholders. The feedback from all of those stakeholders was that they felt that this was not working for schools, parents or children. That was certainly being described to me by the stakeholders. There was an improvement plan for SEN in place when I took up the post, and that improvement plan was being followed. However, in September 2019, very serious accusations about the statutory operation service were made via the media about multiple delays, information governance concerns and a lack of rigour. Following that, I commissioned the audit of practice within the Education Authority. That was carried out by a team of experts in areas such as information governance. They went to all five of the Education Authority offices and assessed the current practice against the appropriate service standards.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): As director of operations and estates, were you responsible for SEN?

Ms Long: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Who was?

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

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Who was?

Ms Long: Dr Clare Mangan.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): When the whistle-blower went to the media in September 2019, serious allegations were made. We have had your ongoing report and the Audit Office report, and it seems to me, having read reports and been a member of the Education Committee since Stormont was re-established, that this problem is deep-rooted, systemic and cultural. Do you agree with that?

Ms Long: Yes, I do.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): What were the reasons for that?

Ms Long: There were a range of reasons. Certainly, the problem is systemic, and we can clearly see that as we look right across. As I described earlier, we were making changes in one area and not, potentially, looking at the impact the changes would have on another area. We were very clearly operating in a silo, and that was within directorates, never mind across directorates. Changes were being implemented without due regard. We were not managing the processes end to end; we were managing disparate bits of them. We did not have a culture of sound information management, and we certainly did not have a performance framework or a corporate governance framework that would allow the problem to come forward. Chair, these are the main issues.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Mr Baker, in his evidence to the Committee earlier, gave credit to the EA and said that there has been better management in place in the last 12 months. Who or what was responsible for this totally unacceptable situation that was affecting hundreds, if not thousands, of young people across Northern Ireland?

Ms Long: As I said earlier, Chair, there is an investigation under way within the Education Authority. It is being conducted by two independent investigators, although it is being overseen by a committee of the board. It has not yet concluded.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): When will it conclude its work?

Ms Long: I am not sure, Chair. I would not like to commit to a timescale that is not of my delivery. It is with the staffing committee. I am happy to come back and provide an update on that at the right and appropriate time, if that is necessary.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I have to say that I share Mr Hilditch's view. Given the scale, length and import of these issues, I would have preferred an independent inquiry. The earlier that this report is put in the public domain, the better. I ask that you come back to the Committee with a timescale. There are huge issues of confidence for our constituents and, most importantly, for the vulnerable young people out there and their families. I would like to see that come in as soon as is possible.

As regards the position that we have got to now, I understand that, in June 2020, there were 285 children with no place; 129 of those were in mainstream schools and 156 were in special schools. I think that that was down to fewer than five by September, which I commend. However, how did we get to a situation where 285 children across Northern Ireland were in this position?

The other point is that there was a differential across the education and library boards in how SEN was promoted and progressed and in statementing. You touched on this earlier. Are you confident that we are getting to the point where that is equalised across Northern Ireland and that it will not be allowed to continue? There are children in some former education and library board regions who are disadvantaged compared to others. It is totally unacceptable.

Ms Long: Chair, I will ask Una to speak further on this, but I will say that we are assured that the processes are regionally consistent. What is not regionally consistent — because, as you described, it is historical — and what we need to address is the level of provision across regions. We know that that remains variable. The permanent secretary, when he was in earlier, described the pilot that is taking place around being able to put in place learning support units without the need for a development proposal. We really welcome that, because it means that, where we identify a need or gap, we will be able to move more quickly to fill that need or gap without necessarily having to do it through a cumbersome bureaucratic process.

I will ask Una to comment specifically on the summer months and how we are moving forward on that.

Ms Turbitt: First and foremost, it was obviously a very difficult time for parents to be in that situation at the end of June, not knowing what class or what school their child would be going to, particularly given that they have a special educational need. We set up 29 additional classes in 27 schools. We did that based on where the children were located and where the schools had space capacity. We still have an issue in that we have particular areas that do not have enough special school places, either in mainstream classes or in special schools. That is a continuing challenge for us. However, we are taking this back. Instead of waiting until June, as was the case this year, we will know by the end of October the children who need to be placed. We will be working towards making sure that they have places much sooner. I need to say again, as regards our limitations, that children are constantly coming through the statementing processes. There will be children who come through in March, April and May who will still need to be placed. However, we are trying to make sure that we know much earlier for the bulk of the children coming through so that, working with schools, we can try to identify suitable provisions to make sure that they are provided for in suitable places.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): How long has this been going on?

Ms Long: In terms of placements?

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): What we are talking about today. I said earlier that it was a deep-rooted, systemic culture, and you, as chief executive, accepted that that was there. How long has that been going on within the Education Authority? Does it go back to the education and library board days, even before the establishment of the Education Authority?

Ms Long: It is hard to comment on that, given the newness of Una to the Education Authority. I have been there since 2016, so I cannot comment on what went before in the education and library boards. What I will say is that some of the planning that we are now identifying that we need to do earlier, and the area planning that we need to do, has been a requirement for some time. We need to bring that forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): It seems to me, as a constituency MLA — we have all had these cases in our constituency offices — and a governor of two schools, that this is a scandal that has been going on for far too long. There is a failure to appreciate our young people and the challenges that they and their families had to endure. I dealt with a case where there was a wait of over a year to get a child statemented. I know the huge anxiety that that caused for that child's parents, the child itself, the principal of the school, the other teachers, the classroom assistants and the other children in the classroom. This is a scandal. My personal opinion— this is not the view of the Committee — is that, because this is a scandal that has gone on for so long — so long that you cannot tell us how long — an independent inquiry should have been instituted to give confidence to the people of Northern Ireland on this hugely sensitive and important issue. I have some other questions that I will come back to, but I will move to other members.

Mr Boylan: You are both very welcome. Sorry, it is a damning report; there is no doubt about it. I have listened to some of the questions and answers and been trying to compose a few questions — there are that many, to be honest with you — to get the best out of this session. I am mindful that we heard in the first session that there was a 13-year review. How long would this have continued if we had not got the reports? Learning from what was sitting in your desk when you moved in — I am on a board of governors, so I understand the change from the old system of the ELBs to the new one of the EA. How long would this have continued if these reports had not been done in 2017 and if there had not been the work that was conducted by others previous to you?

Ms Long: The audit of practice that we conducted in November and December 2019 provided a clear set of recommendations in this area that we immediately took measures to address, rather than wait for the conclusion of the other reports. This report has certainly added to and strengthened those findings and recommendations. It goes beyond and further.

Mr Boylan: But it is in reflection of a 2017 report and a 2020 follow-up report from the Audit Office. That is very concerning.

I want to pick up on some of the points that other members raised. As Una was saying, part of the process of how you pick and support the children in schools is down to the schools' resources. That is one question, so we understand that it is about identifying resources. On the other hand, you said to my colleague that, even if you had the resources, you may not get that result either. So it is not all

about resources. That is very concerning. I am on boards, and I know how hard schools find this. Principals are now managers and accountants; they have to do all those things to try to stretch budgets. In one respect, we are trying to use whatever resources we have, but there is a whole team of players and a whole partnership in there. In your view, who are all the players? I see it outside of all that, and I think that there is a broader picture to identify all that within. I would like your views on what you are trying to impose now that will come to fruition for all that.

Ms Long: My earlier comment was about not wanting to build a large corporate centre, if you like, on resourcing schools. Schools need to be resourced to do what they need to at the first three stages of the code of practice. I am clear about that. We then need to have the right and appropriate support services to enable them to do that.

Una, do you want to say more about the stakeholders?

Ms Turbitt: We need to support the schools at the earliest stage and make sure that we have programmes and resources in place through our classroom assistants, who are properly trained and supported to deliver, so that they can support schools to achieve educational outcomes for children. However, the voluntary and community sector also plays a key role in this. Schools should be part of communities. One of the things that we see whenever we try to place children is that we have to place them outside their communities. It is really important that we take a whole-school approach to that and make sure that we work in partnership with our colleagues in Health, the community and voluntary sector and other organisations in order to maximise our input. We need to work in partnership and to collaborate to make that difference.

Mr Boylan: We have a long way to go, to be honest.

Ms Turbitt: We do.

Mr Boylan: I want to reflect on some figures, although it is not all about figures. I know that analytics were asked about. It is about individual schoolchildren. The report states that in 2014-15 86% of children with special educational needs left school with at least five GCSEs. That is commendable for 2014-15, but it is not a true reflection right across the board. It is the data that we have at the minute. I said to Derek Baker previously that we have failed some children. I know that the Chair asked for an independent review. Will the fact that children have been failed over the last number of years be factored in? Have you thought about that, and are you reflecting on it? Will there be any commentary on that element of it?

Ms Long: Children have been failed, and we have accepted that. I apologised for that at the Education Committee. They have been failed in a number of ways. It is hard to understand the impact of that at a population level, but we know that individual children have not been placed or have struggled to be placed in the right setting. We know that that is a detriment to them. Some have not had the right level of assistance that they should have had. We have failed children. We need to move forward to make sure that we are not in that position any more. I feel very strongly about that as well. The impacts on individual children and families are evidenced in all the communications and correspondence that you all receive. They are very real experiences for children. As I said, I have met parents who have described some of it to me. It is not an acceptable standard, and I am clear about that.

Mr Boylan: I have two more points, Chair, before others come in. You talked about understanding the demand and identifying the overall need. As I said, the Department sits outside your organisation, but, besides putting all the processes, stages and resources in place, we need a better way of identifying and supporting children. Early intervention is key. We hear all the time that the sponge years are at a certain age, and then we hear about children getting statemented at 11 or 12 years of age in post-primary schools. Some of them may do well, but some may not. Obviously, the report has highlighted some of the process. Would you like to comment on how we go about understanding the demand and identifying the need?

Ms Long: One of the key pieces of feedback that we get is that, with the time-allocation model, the unmet need is held at school level. In the review of the model, we need to better understand how we get an overall picture of that. If schools are deciding which children to put forward, and there is a range of children in a school who could benefit from early intervention, it is important that we get the overall picture on that and not just on those children who the school has to be in a position to put forward.

Mr Boylan: Do we have the expertise? Did we lose expertise in the changeover from the education and library boards (ELBs), bearing in mind some of the comments that the Chair made about past practices? Where do we sit with expertise now?

Ms Long: There is no doubt that we lost expertise, but we also gained expertise. For example, the person leading on this for us in the Education Authority is a seconded school principal who has many experiences in this field. I believe that that will be very helpful for us in understanding the different perspectives.

Mr Boylan: Mr Muir made a good point when he said that you are part of the jigsaw. I think that you will be part of the coalface, to be honest with you, when that is rolled out. The EA is definitely part of the coalface and needs to make sure that this is rolled out on the ground where it is at, which is the coalface.

Mr Beggs: Like other members, I am aware of huge frustration among schools, principals and teachers about the bottleneck that exists as a result of the rationing of education psychology assessments.

You indicated that you are aware of the importance of early intervention, but would you not accept that rationing is resulting in no intervention, not even in support for the teacher who needs help with the child who they have in the classroom, meaning that there is then an adverse effect on others in the class?

Ms Long: As well as having the volume of services that we have available at Stage 3, it is important that schools and children can access those services. That is part of the reason for the bottleneck. There are services at Stage 3 that should not require an educational psychology assessment but currently do. As well as having the allocation model for educational psychologists, there is some work to do on direct access to Stage 3 services as well to enhance and improve early intervention, and we should do that as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr Beggs: In order to be aware of the scale of the problem, you need to know how many pupils the teachers want to refer. That information is not stored centrally but is available in each school's special educational needs register. Why is it not held centrally to allow us to know the real scale of the number of teachers wishing to refer pupils to an educational psychologist?

Ms Long: That was my commentary about fully understanding our demand. All that unmet need is held at school level, and I am not sure how we could ever be sure that we have the appropriate resource to meet it if we do not know what it is. There is no doubt that how we might capture that in a meaningful way is a significant piece of work. There is also no doubt that the single biggest piece of feedback that school leaders have given me in that space is that we need to find a way to do that work, and we need to find a way to do it that does not place an additional burden on a school.

Mr Beggs: Paragraph 2.19 states:

"each of the services has a different way to quantify service capacity and average response time."

Why is there not a consistent method of recording the levels of demand throughout all schools?

Ms Long: There needs to be.

Mr Beggs: Sorry, but it has been five years since the boards were amalgamated. You have been in post for 18 months. Why is it not there now?

Ms Long: That goes back to some of my answers to previous questions. It is not that we still have a variation around local offices; it is about services, and different services grew those ways of monitoring their weights through, for example, individual spreadsheets. We did not have a corporate approach to our data and information, and that is something that we are doing, which I described.

Mr Beggs: Is this not fundamental? It is a very basic requirement in any system to have one system operating in each school.

Ms Long: I believe that it is a fundamental requirement, yes. It is very important for us, and we will not be in a position to make truly informed decisions until we have it.

Mr Beggs: When will it be there?

Ms Long: I do not know that yet. That piece of work is being worked through as part of the overall review.

Mr Beggs: I am aware of very direct one-to-one work with classroom assistants at primary school. I am not as well informed about their role in post-primary schools, but I have faced criticism from some classroom assistants that their job is to stand at the back of the classroom and not to intervene. Multiple classroom assistants who we are paying for using the SEN money are standing at the back of the classroom and not intervening. Is that good use of public money? Is it good for the children?

Ms Long: No, it is not. It is not good use of public money. School leaders, particularly in post-primary schools, have articulated that they are not sure whether the classroom assistant model is the most right and appropriate model to be used at certain phases in post-primary schools. We have agreed to move forward with a pilot. Una, I do not know whether you want to say more about that.

Ms Turbitt: I think that your point is really well made. We are spending a significant sum on classroom assistants, and they are absolutely valuable, but we need to make sure that we are using them in a way that will support children to achieve educational outcomes. That requires us to make them part of the team approach. We are working with a number of principals to develop a pilot that will allow us to test what the most effective model is. We know that there is huge pressure on us to allocate classroom assistants to children. Sometimes it is maybe not deemed to be the best way forward, but the desire for the security that having a classroom assistant provides brings a real pressure. We need to build confidence among our parents and our schools so that we can find ways, particularly where children are getting that bit older and we need to encourage them to become more independent, to allow the children to become less reliant on a classroom assistant.

Mr Beggs: In allocating hours for the classroom assistant in a particular class to follow a certain child in need, is there any appreciation or understanding of the number of classroom assistants that are already in the class that that pupil is in?

Ms Turbitt: That is taken into consideration when the statement is being made.

Mr Beggs: That will change through different classes and different subjects.

Ms Turbitt: Yes, and some of the principals are saying to us that they would like classroom assistants for particular subject areas in post-primary schools. They would like a classroom assistant who we could maybe develop and train to support literacy, numeracy or ICT so that they become a part of the school team rather than being allocated for so many hours to a child, following them around the different classes. That is the pilot that we are working towards to see whether we can test other ways of working that parents and schools will feel confident with and that the children and young people in particular will welcome.

Mr Beggs: I think that, according to one of your graphs, there has been an increase in funding in that area. I welcome that.

Finally, figure 2 of the report is a graph that shows the very significant upturn in the cost, which is currently at £311 million. You will have an understanding of when each of those children who are attracting the cost will leave and of the likely number coming into the system. Can you provide us with projected costs on the current model going forward? That is very important. We need to know what the cost is going forward, whether this is the best use of our public funding and what we should be doing to best help pupils in need. Are projection figures available?

Ms Long: We do not have a projection figure, no.

Mr Beggs: Who plans?

Ms Turbitt: We know that there is a year-on-year increase in the number of children coming through with special educational needs. In comparison with 2015-16, we have a 15.8% increase in the number of children with statements, and we know the costs of each of those statements in terms of the number of hours. We have some sense that there is a growing cost. Some of our other growing costs relate to things such as the increase in inflation and the teachers' salary review. Those factors need to be taken into consideration. Part of it, however, is about turning this around so that we are less dependent on statements, if that is feasible. We need to try to manage this and reduce, through early intervention and other models, the demand. It is really a case of spending to save, in a sense, if we can get in the right early intervention models — models that work — and if we try to manage the demand for statements and the number of children with statements.

Mr Beggs: I fully support the concept of earlier intervention. That is good. I am surprised, however, that you do not have some projected or expected costs. Do you not know how many children with special educational needs are leaving at the end of June and how many you are expecting to come in? Can you not give some sort of figure for the current system's projected need for next year? Who knows that?

Ms Turbitt: Yes, we do know. We collect the information each month on the number of children who are leaving. That is normally done at a point in the year when we know that children who are beyond the compulsory age are leaving, and that is taken into consideration. Year-on-year, however, the number of children with statements who require support is increasing, but that is taken into consideration.

Mr Beggs: I am quite surprised that you do not have a rough idea of the figures, because you will know the cost of those who are leaving and you will know roughly the cost if a similar number come into the system, and that will be a higher number. Do you not have any projections? Can you not provide us with figures?

Ms Long: I do not want to give a rough figure, but it is certainly something that I can come back to you with.

Ms Turbitt: Yes. We can do that.

Mr Beggs: It is important that everybody understands it so that we can come up with a better system.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Ms Turbitt and Ms Long. Are you aware that if a child who is on a waiting list for a special needs assessment moves school, that child moves to the bottom of the list? Would you say that that needs to be addressed? Can it be? There is probably zero cost involved.

Ms Turbitt: Yes. It does need to be addressed.

Ms Long: Yes. I was not aware that that is a practice. If it is a practice, it needs to be addressed, yes.

Mr Harvey: I have had a few complaints, so perhaps it is something that you can look at.

Ms Long: Yes. Absolutely.

Mr Harvey: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Some members have indicated that they want to ask further questions.

Who is chairing the board that is overseeing the internal report?

Ms Long: The chair of the children and young people's services committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Who is that?

Ms Long: Pat Carville.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Is he —?

Ms Long: She.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Is she a member of the Education Authority board?

Ms Long: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. How is the group populated? Who are its other members?

Ms Long: Rev Robert Herron.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Just one other person.

Ms Long: No. There is also Rev Amanda, whose surname I have just had a complete blank on. Chair, I am so sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. Are they all members of the EA board?

Ms Long: They are, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): There are three board members.

Ms Long: As a subcommittee, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. Who took the decision on the internal report? Was it your board?

Ms Long: It is an internal investigation.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes. Who took the decision that that is how you would go forward?

Ms Long: The board took that decision.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. The board therefore took a decision that there would be an internal investigation, and three of its members were put on a —.

Ms Long: I took the decision that there would be an internal investigation, and then, as matters progressed, a subcommittee of the board was established to oversee it.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Was your board in agreement with your decision?

Ms Long: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. You took a decision, and your board agreed. Three members of your board were asked to sit on the group, along with two independent investigators.

Ms Long: There are two independent investigations and an independent HR adviser.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. Those six people are taking this forward.

Given the issues that members have teased out today, that we have read about in the report and that have been played out in the public domain, why was there no understanding or appreciation in the Education Authority that, when dealing with issues that are of such importance, an independent inquiry was the way forward?

Ms Long: What I am describing is an independent investigation, and I do not think that that precludes any independent inquiry from happening. I am on the record as saying that, if we conclude that independent oversight is needed, I am happy for us to do that. We need to do it at the right and appropriate time, however.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Did your board or you, as the chief executive, not set a time limit for this piece of work to be concluded and for the group to report back to the board?

Ms Long: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Why not?

Ms Long: It is linked to internal processes, and I do not think that it is —.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): My concern is that, when we look at the figures for this year, we are told that there are 107 children waiting more than 80 weeks.

Ms Long: No. That was this time last year, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Right. How many children are currently waiting for 80 weeks?

Ms Long: None.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): None. How many children are waiting for more than 60 weeks?

Ms Long: Ten.

Ms Turbitt: Ten.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): That means that 10 children are waiting into a second year. You have given a commitment that no child should wait longer than 26 weeks, is that right?

Ms Turbitt: Taking into consideration valid exceptions.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Twenty-six weeks is half a year.

Ms Turbitt: Yes. The 26-week time frame is based on the statutory time frame that is set out for the EA in legislation, and that allows us to go through the process of providing the statutory assessment. Twenty-six weeks is therefore within the time frame. When it is implemented, the new SEN legislation will reduce the time frame to 22 weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. How can the EA determine whether education and educational psychology resources are appropriate when there is no overall measure of unmet need?

Ms Long: Chair, that goes back to my earlier point. I do not know whether we will ever be able to determine what resource is fully required until we have an understanding of that unmet need, and that is currently held at school level. We can review the time allocation model, but until we have a full picture of what the current need is, we will not be in a position to deliver the appropriate resource. That will have to form a key part of the investigation.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Early intervention is important for a child's health, mental well-being and education. It is also important for the child's family. Early intervention is also more effective, and it is more cost-effective for the taxpayer. Why therefore is there no target for how quickly a child will access stage 3 support services?

Ms Long: There is not one currently. As I described earlier, however, we are moving forward with our performance management framework. Access to services will form a key part of the standards that we set as part of the performance management framework.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): This is not just about what has happened since last September when the whistle-blower came forward. I am concerned that this has been going on for some time. That is why I believe that there is a huge confidence issue with the Education Authority in Northern Ireland, particularly on the SEN issue, although I do agree with the point that Mr Muir made earlier about the organisation's functionality. There are other issues that are of huge importance to our young people that the Committee will come back to.

Mr Hilditch wants to come back in.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you, Chair. While the spotlight is on SEN, I will ask whether there are any connections and dependencies elsewhere in the EA that impact on SEN. For example, do areas such as transport, area planning, capital projects, health, well-being and finance require attention to help out SEN? Do any of those impinge on SEN?

Ms Long: They all impact on SEN, and SEN impacts on their ability to deliver services. Area planning is a key issue. Earlier, we described the mismatch in provision in particular parts of Northern Ireland. The only way in which we will be able to address that mismatch is through a rigorous area-planning process. Our transport-related SEN costs are considerable. We know that children with SEN rely heavily on transport to access their education, so that is vital as well. Again, the more speedily that we complete the statement, the better placed that we will be to put the provision in place. The statementing process is only one piece of it, so we do not want further knock-on delays, in, for example, transport or the provision of adult assistance through HR.

Mr Hilditch: That is why it is crucial that the silos be broken down and that this be tackled head-on.

Ms Turbitt: May I come in on that? I just want to put this on the record. We had a really significant challenge with the 285 children who needed to be placed by the end of June. That that happened was because we worked together. The silos were broken down, and I was given support from our operations and estates colleagues, those who are involved in minor works, our human resources colleagues and our school development service. It was a joined-up and corporate effort. I feel very strongly that what got us over the line will continue to get us over the line as we strive towards the March target.

Mr Hilditch: I understand that recruitment has been suspended since March. With the passing of Johnnie McAlister, who was the lollipop man at Carrickfergus Model Primary School, kids with various educational needs have had to face crossing four lanes of traffic at a busy rush hour on one of the busiest roads in Northern Ireland. The post has been vacant for three or four months now. You are still sitting on that guy's budget but have not recruited. Surely now is the time to recruit, particularly in the SEN category. People are sitting at home in front of their computer and whatnot. They do not have plenty of time, but they certainly have time to have a wee look at what you are offering and get a form filled in or a CV off. To make your job easier, would it not be better to have some form of recruitment now?

Ms Long: Recruitment has been suspended for any new or additional posts in the organisation. It was not suspended for replacement posts, such as lollipop men or bus drivers, and the other area that was prioritised was SEN. That has not happened, so the reason for it —

Mr Hilditch: Do you agree that you are putting kids with —

Ms Long: — must be a different delay. I will —.

Mr Hilditch: — various educational needs at risk when they have to cross a four-lane road? I am sorry for bringing a constituency matter into the discussion, Chair. I am sure that you will allow me that latitude.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Long: I will follow that up when I get back.

Mr Hilditch: Please do.

Ms Long: That is not as a result of a suspension of recruitment. It will be because of something else.

Mr Hilditch: As chief executive of the organisation, Sara, you have told us a lot today about how you would like to get rid of this or do that and how you want more of something else. You are the chief executive, so I am asking you to take on board the difficulties outlined today and get on with addressing them as a team.

Ms Long: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Are there quotas for referrals for children to meet educational psychologists?

Ms Long: That is the time allocation model.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes.

Ms Long: That happens at stage 3. That is the time allocation model, as we described.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes. What percentage of open assessments are now over 26 weeks?

Ms Turbitt: On average, 38%.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Compared with what a year ago?

Ms Turbitt: It would have been well in the high 40s.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Is it therefore 10% better?

Ms Turbitt: I would need to double-check the figure, but it has been brought down. When we bring the longest waits down, that has the most impact on the average.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): As I was saying to Mr Baker earlier, I was part of the Education Committee group that met the principals of special educational needs schools informally. They then came to the Committee. They face particular and very difficult challenges with their teams. What is the position on area planning for special educational needs across Northern Ireland?

Ms Long: We have just launched our consultation document on the frameworks for area planning for special schools and for specialist provision in mainstream schools, which, we hope, will set out a future direction of travel for area planning for special schools and move it forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Are principals of special schools regularly consulted on those issues?

Ms Long: That is the purpose of this consultation framework. It was developed alongside special school principals so that, for the first time in special school area planning, we could have an open and transparent framework against which decisions could be assessed. That is out to consultation at the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Do we know what the projection looks like for the next three to five years?

Ms Long: Una has described that work, and we are currently undertaking it.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): When will that be concluded, Una?

Ms Turbitt: It will need to go into the programme approach that we are taking forward. I have spoken to special school principals as part of the work of trying to get children placed. They tell us clearly that their schools are at capacity; they are full. They have gone beyond full, and they are using spaces that were never intended to be classrooms. Over 6,000 pupils are enrolled in special ed schools, and that is increasing. The complexity of the children's needs, medical needs and so on, is also increasing. That, in turn, creates a significant challenge around space. We have to work with special schools and principals to understand where the demand is, and both the Department and the Education Authority need to use area planning to see where demand is. We must then use the information from the statutory operations process to inform development in school builds. That is really important. Points were well made about working in a silo. We need to make sure that we share this intelligence and make informed decisions as to where schools should be.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): How far does the Education Authority look forward for future-proofing purposes and projections? Was this work being done five or 10 years ago?

Ms Turbitt: I cannot comment on that. I am relatively new to this.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Sara, can you comment?

Ms Long: Not on the position 10 years ago. We did it on an ad hoc basis and year-to-year, rather than with long-term planning. We now want to make exactly the shift that Una has described. We know, from their birth, when some of these children will enter our system, and that is the point at which we should start to map and project that; and no, we have not been doing that.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I am alarmed to hear that it was done on an ad hoc basis. There clearly was not sufficient joined-upness across government around these issues. I sincerely hope that that joined-upness is there now.

I conclude, from today's sessions, that there has not been sufficient recognition of the importance of the special children that we are talking about or the value of early interventions. There was a deep-rooted, systemic and cultural problem in your organisation, as you have accepted. I am concerned that we do not know how long that has been going on. There is no answer. We do not know how many there are; that figure is not known. That is a sad reflection on the Education Authority in Northern Ireland over the last period. There is a huge duty of responsibility on your shoulders, as chief executive, and on your board to ensure that this is addressed as a matter of urgency. These completely unacceptable figures have to be addressed for the welfare of all these young people, their families, the teachers who work with them and the staff who support the teachers. I implore you to come back to us, as soon as you can, with an end date on those issues in this internal investigation.

We will have some conversations after you leave, around that issue. I will be open and honest with you. I do not think that a number of the questions that I have asked have been answered sufficiently. Other members think the same. This is a hugely important issue and one that we need to put right once and for all.

As no other member has indicated that they want to speak, I want to thank you very much. At this point, I will ask Mr Donnelly and Mr Stevenson whether they wish to ask or add anything.

Mr Kieran Donnelly (Northern Ireland Audit Office): I have one point to make about case reviews that is very relevant to forecasting. Interventions would not be for the full life of a schoolchild and, maybe, if an intervention has worked after a couple of years, a case should be reviewed. Do the witnesses have any comments to make on the importance of case review?

Ms Long: Yes. I agree. That is part of the issue with the model as well. If a child receives provision early in their school life, that provision will remain with them throughout their school life. With regard to promoting independence as well, as Una has described, we need to become more rigorous on that issue.

Ms Turbitt: An annual review is carried out as part of the statutory process. Therefore, each child who has a statement has an annual review. That is carried out and led by the school. Where the school principal, SENCO or teachers feel that an amendment needs to be made to the provision, the Education Authority's statutory operations officer will attend that review.

Some very good practice has happened; for example, in the area of diabetes. A child might start off with a statement. Then, through the annual review, it is determined that they no longer require a statement for that purpose. Those are the sorts of things that we do need to look at and can look at as part of the overall programme approach.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. Thank you very much. Good afternoon — sorry, Mr Stevenson, do you want to come in?

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): I have no questions at this stage, Chair. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. You are free to go.

Ms Long: Thank you.