



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Special Educational Needs:
Education Authority, Department of Finance,
Northern Ireland Audit Office

19 November 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
Dr Andy McMorrán	Education Authority
Ms Sharon O'Connor	Education Authority
Mr Kieran Donnelly	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I invite Ms Sharon O'Connor, who is chair of the board of the Education Authority (EA), and Dr Andy McMorrán, who is a member of the board and the children and young people's strategy (CYPS) committee, to join the meeting. Both are joining us remotely. Good afternoon, Ms O'Connor and Dr McMorrán.

Ms O'Connor, would you like to make an opening statement? I will then open the meeting to questions from members. Good afternoon. You are very welcome.

Ms Sharon O'Connor (Education Authority): Thank you, Chair. I would like to make a few brief opening remarks. You have had a long afternoon, and you do not want to listen to a long speech at this point. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the issues around special education. Neither I nor my fellow board member Dr Andy McMorrán want to take up your time unnecessarily.

We deeply regret that children and their families have been let down. I assure the Committee that the board is fully focused on the improvement programme that is in place. We welcome the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report. We also welcome the Children's Commissioner's report and our internal audit of practice. As those reports have demonstrated, there is an urgent need to improve the service, but significant progress has been made this year. Clearly, there is more to be done, but I believe that we are moving in the right direction. Special education has always been to the fore of the board's considerations. We are glad to see the progress that is being made in what is an extremely complex area, particularly given the funding constraints and changing policy environment.

Dr McMorran is one of our educational experts on the board. Many of you will know him. He has long-standing experience in education. I am an ex-local government chief executive with 30 years of non-executive experience. I am also a chartered director, professionally qualified in governance. I have adopted a practice of keeping myself very much up to speed with continuing professional development in the area of governance.

With that, Chair, I hand back to you. We are happy to be here to support you in your endeavours. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Thank you very much. We have just been listening to your former chief executive, Mr Boyd. What role did the board play in the EA's response to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report of 2017?

Ms O'Connor: Immediately following the NIAO report, which I was pleased to see — I am keenly interested in these matters — the Department of Education established a programme board, and our senior executive colleagues were represented on that. We closely followed the actions in progress that came through that vehicle. We had oversight of those matters through our children and young people's services committee and through our audit and risk assurance committee (ARAC). As a consequence of the 2017 report, these matters were elevated on our risk register and listed as the number three risk in the organisation generally. We had two vehicles to observe the progress being made as a consequence of the recommendations of that report.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Do you think that the response from the board was robust and effective enough?

Ms O'Connor: The fundamental cornerstone of governance, and it is a central plank of all the governance codes, whether it is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) code of governance, the combined code or any of the other codes of practice that exist, is to ensure that board members should have access to accurate, relevant and timely information. It is reasonable that board members were reliant on their executive colleagues to provide them with accurate information. Certainly, all the feedback that we got through those mechanisms was encouraging and positive news.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Does that mean that the board left it to the executive to respond? Did the subcommittee that Mr Boyd referred to and which met 10 times a year then inform the board, the executive informed the subcommittee, which would, in turn, inform the board, and the board would then decide whether it was happy enough with how the executive was handling it? Is that how it worked?

Ms O'Connor: I do not recognise which subcommittee we are talking about, Chair. However, as a result of the report in 2017, we did a number of things. We set up our own transformation working group. We established the engagement consultation programme with stakeholders, parents and others in order to have a direct feedback loop into the community. We were in receipt of all of the transformation plans that derived from that and which came through our working party and through the work of the programme board in the Department of Education. The committee viewed the progress through the reports that came via our director and took a view on the information that it was being provided with.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): In 2019, an audit of practice was commissioned within the EA following what were termed, "serious accusations" about the special educational needs (SEN) statutory service. This was conducted internally by EA staff. Will you expand on that and advise the Committee of the status of that report's findings?

Ms O'Connor: I was extremely happy to see that internal audit initiated, because I had been talking to the board and the Department for some time about the need for a review. The issues that we are dealing with are significant. We had deficiencies in our own practice, and those are set out and explored in the Audit Office report. Through our connections in the community, I was also conscious, as were other board members, that there were a lot of things that people were not happy about. Part of our response to that was to initiate the process of review. At the time, the current chief executive and I had slightly different views on this. I wanted a significant, system-wide review, very much like the Doran review in Scotland, which was completed in 2012 and set in train a significant range of improvements in the delivery of support to children who had additional requirements. In the aftermath

of what were very serious concerns, Sara felt that she needed to get into the nuts and bolts of the operation, and we agreed to prioritise that internal review. The internal review provided members with information that they were previously unaware of, and the immediate consequence of that was that we took fairly robust action. The board is still involved in managing the improvements indicated in that report. I believe that those have been comprehensively detailed to the Education Committee and to you. I will not rehearse those improvements, but they are in train, and I was pleased to see that the Audit Office observed those improvement processes and commented positively on them.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): In January of this year, consideration was given by the chief executive to the audit of practice report. That has now led to a further internal investigation by three board members and two people, deemed to be independent experts, who were brought in. Given that there was an internal report last year, which has led now to another internal report, does the board really think that an internal report is the way forward?

Ms O'Connor: We have to separate a couple of different strands. The board was responsible for oversight of these matters. Although we had the internal audit of practices, which Sara initiated, we have also reviewed our own practice. We had an externally managed process looking at our governance, particularly our committee structure. I initiated that because I took the view, on the basis of my experience, that, because of the span and range of work of what is a very large board, it is well-nigh impossible for members to be fully sighted on all the work of the authority. We therefore brought in an independent firm of consultants to look at our committee structure, and members are still working through its recommendations.

Additionally, the chief executive has actioned a review of governance of the operational arrangements, so a separate independent review is examining how the executive team supports the board with formal communication mechanisms and performance management systems so that the board is fully supported in its oversight role. Therefore, much more has been done than just the internal audit of practices, and that review builds on a whole series of work that we have done over the last several years in constantly reviewing our governance practices.

Mr Beggs: You indicated that you were unaware of some issues. Will you advise what performance information was presented to the board?

Ms O'Connor: Our committee was provided with information on the number of children being statemented and the increasing number of children presenting for statements. Over the life of the board, there has been an increase of about 30% in the number coming forward in the statementing process. We were provided with information on the number of children who were subject to delays. I do not want to get into the detail of that at this point, Mr Beggs. It is covered in the internal audit, and I can add further detail at a later stage. We were provided with the headline information on the numbers. We were also provided with regular updates on the improvement projects that were ongoing, a number of which came out of the transformation programme that we partly initiated and which, latterly, was taken on by the Department. The information provided showed lots of activity and many very positive developments in that work.

Mr Beggs: Were you advised of significant issues with the accuracy and reliability of that information, the level of performance against the 26-week target and the use of the terminology "valid exceptions"? Was the board made aware of those specific issues?

Ms O'Connor: I will have to choose my words carefully here, Mr Beggs. The direct answer is that we were not fully aware of those matters.

Mr Beggs: Did you or other board members think to ask questions in those areas?

Ms O'Connor: Yes, but we were provided with appropriate assurances. Also, the information that came back from the programme board, which had been running since 2017, recorded positive progress on all the matters that came out of the 2017 report. It was therefore reasonable for board members to place some confidence in and draw some assurance from that information.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Dr McMorran, did you indicate that you wanted to speak?

Dr Andy McMorran (Education Authority): Yes. It comes down to the number of people on the board who are ex-principals etc. They are knowledgeable about the whole 26-week process in the

special education situation — it used to be called "statemented"; it is now "statutory assessment" — so they realised that. This, however, goes back to another point. When you talk about the performance of the board and what it can and cannot do — I think that that was Mr Beggs's underlying comment — I mention, as I have before, something that derived from the Department of Education while I was being trained to be part of this board:

"EA board members should maintain a focus on strategy, performance and behaviour and not be diverted by detail which is the responsibility of the chief executive and staff. In cases where board members become involved in operational issues, there is a significant risk that good governance, good management and clear accountability are likely to suffer."

That hits the nail on the head; it is what happened.

Mr Beggs: To whom are the board officers accountable?

Dr McMorran: Are you asking me?

Mr Beggs: I am asking both of you.

Dr McMorran: The chief executive.

Ms O'Connor: The executive team reports to the chief executive, and the chief executive reports to the board. It is our job to hold the chief executive to account for the performance of the senior team. In practice, that means that every director will respond to members through the various committee structures. That arrangement was in place and worked pretty effectively, in that members asked the appropriate questions.

I have to say that board members understand their role on the basis of the on-board training that was provided, and the Northern Ireland Audit Office guidance was supplied to all board members. To remind members of their responsibilities, we have done refresher training on a number of occasions since the board was established. I believe that members, to the best of their ability, scrutinised pretty effectively the work of the relevant departments. I cannot go much further than that.

Mr Beggs: One of the major concerns of principals is the delay in statementing and, in particular, the delay in getting an assessment by an educational psychologist. Each school is allocated a limited number of hours. If an additional child requires an assessment, or multiple children come along and the hours are not available, that information is recorded in the school but not centrally. How can you know the level of demand for services without knowing the number of children who are awaiting educational psychology assessments? Why was that information not gathered centrally?

Ms O'Connor: There is a dearth of good data analysis in the whole system, not just in wait times for assessment. We were aware of the high numbers but did not have the operational information on the wait times. We certainly asked questions about that. However, the fact of the matter is that we are operating in a very significantly constrained financial environment. While we would like to have an open access policy so that every principal could access an assessment immediately, or as quickly thereafter as could be organised, we simply do not have the resources to provide anything like what would be required, and what should be available. That is because of financial constraints. That is the long and short of it. There needs to be some sort of management of resource. Unfortunately, I have had principals telling me about how unhappy they are with that, but I have not been in a position to offer them a solution. Andy, is there anything that you want to add from the principals' perspective?

Dr McMorran: Yes. The statutory assessment process is very complicated. It is not just the fact that the health service is slow to react; there is much more to it than that. I spoke to a retired statementing officer. She left when we were in a situation in which we wanted to cut the financial deficit, and we were very successful in that. Unfortunately, due to voluntary severance etc, the quality, efficiency and expertise of the people who were dealing with all of this had gone, and that put stress and strain on the people who were still there. The person whom I spoke to had left six months previously, and she still broke down in tears when she realised that she had been dealing with, at one stage in the past, up to 1,000 cases. Just let that sink in. You are talking about the delay, but 26 weeks is not a long time when you consider that, in that one situation, statementing officers are dealing with parents, teachers, education psychologists, the health service and experts in other fields. There are many more cases: for example, when new kids are coming in or there are kids who are under real pressure, the

statementing process is very complex. Remember where it starts: it starts in the school situation. In the past, in special needs, you had a teacher who taught as normal and was given a couple of periods a week for that. That was an absolute disaster. Then, a special needs department developed, and it has now become a much more efficient and effective system. However, it generates, as you will see from the numbers — for a principal, it can be very frustrating — more and more children presenting for statementing. In the statementing process, when dealing with the parents, remember that a parent can ask questions, come back and revisit etc — rightly so — but that only adds time to the process, and that is what has happened.

Mr Beggs: Finally, what role does the board see itself having in determining the effectiveness of the use of special educational needs funding and whether there is any need for reform in how it delivers the service to pupils in need?

Ms O'Connor: One of the things that we undertook in the CYPS was the restructuring of our educational psychology service, which was principally intended to grow our own intake of educational psychology professionals because we increasingly need more and more of them. That requires finance as well, and, in the straitened circumstances in which we live, we cannot have everything that we would like to have to run the service.

On identifying the educational impact, it is more for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to measure what is happening in the educational environment. We get the general feedback on performance, receive reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate, and we get information and data through our officers on how various parts of the system are working.

Mr Beggs: I have received a critical report from a classroom assistant in a post-primary school. They complained — I have said this several times but I am asking you about it— of multiple classroom assistants standing at the back of a classroom and not engaging. They are there on standby in case they are needed because of behavioural issues. Do you consider that to be a good use of the limited funds that are available to help children in need? What alternative would you suggest?

Ms O'Connor: I will respond briefly and then bring in my educational expert. I feel very strongly on this point. I am a parent of a child who has a severe learning disability. One of the things that I feel very strongly about is that we should have a better system for supporting children who have additional needs. Again, I take you back to the point that I made about the Scottish system. There, the default position is mainstream, but they have all sorts of mechanisms to support children who have complex needs. One of the growing aspects of the children who now present in numbers is the number who are on the autistic spectrum, and those children are placed in the mainstream, rightly, but that is a challenge for our traditional mainstream environment. Andy, I am sure that you will want to comment on that.

Dr McMorran: Mr Beggs, excuse me for getting a little emotional about this, but I will answer your question and respond to the comment that you have just made. What you have just said is 100% true. What the classroom assistant said to you is 100% true, and it is an absolute and total disgrace. I was allowed to be given money by the old Belfast Education and Library Board to cut my cloth to suit my children; now, classroom assistants are allocated per pupil. Having that many people in a room is, I am sorry to say, just ineffective.

If we can go back one more step — I will give my personal opinion on this — I think that there is enough money in the Northern Ireland education system. I also think that there are too many schools. We have schools that need to close. However, to close schools, you have to take on the local population, and, because everyone in the local population has a vote, that is very difficult to do. We have too many schools in Northern Ireland, and therefore the money that we have is not being used effectively.

Mr Beggs: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): At this stage, I will make our two guests aware that the reception here is very poor. I understand from one of the Committee members that it was exactly the same this morning during the Health Committee. That is not doing justice to you and the evidence that we are hearing from you, so, with your permission, cooperation and understanding, I will adjourn the meeting for a short time to see whether we can sort out the technical issues, if you do not mind. Is that OK?

Dr McMorran: OK.

Ms O'Connor: Thank you, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. Members, we will adjourn to try to address these technical issues.

The Committee suspended at 4.47 pm and resumed at 5.03 pm.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): We are back in open session. My apologies for the technical difficulties; they were beyond most of our control.

Ms O'Connor and Dr McMorran, can you hear us OK?

Ms O'Connor: Yes, Chair. Thank you.

Dr McMorran: Yes. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Mr Beggs had concluded his questioning, so I will move on to Mr Hilditch.

Mr Hilditch: Good evening, Sharon and Andy.

Dr McMorran: Good evening.

Ms O'Connor: Good evening.

Mr Hilditch: Andy, I hope that you do not have to go through all those papers the whole night. *[Laughter.]* I listened to your opening answers and statements. Andy, will you clarify your role in operational matters? Obviously, a lot of the reporting stuff that came out in 2017 would maybe fall under operational matters.

Dr McMorran: You are talking to me as a board member. If you were to go right back to when we were trained and to what we had to do, you would find that it has developed over the years. You asked what our role is, so I will describe it using an animal analogy. We are either a nodding dog or a scapegoat. I think that the idea of a scapegoat is why we are sitting in front of you now. That would be the role of the board. I know that you talked about the subcommittee, but it was not; it was the children and young people's services directorate.

In that, you have to be very careful because, at the end of every meeting, for example, we get all the statements for that month to be ratified. That is very confidential information, and it is very important for the children and the schools involved. To get operational there is a grey area, but that is something for the Department of Education to sort out. It came up with that structure; that is the board structure that the Department wanted. Sharon will tell you that it is a very diverse board. She has managed to knit it together, as you will see when you think of the political reps and others who are on it.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate that. I want to move on to the Education Authority's effectiveness. It was a new body a few years ago. Unfortunately, over a period of time people have come to me at various times and referred to its poor leadership, poor governance, a blame culture and systemic failure to deal with change, and they have said that it has a traditional, old-style Civil Service approach. We know that a lot of people came from the five boards into the one authority. Sharon, from your point of view, did you see any of that type of thing, considering the experience that you had in local government in the past?

Ms O'Connor: That is a very interesting point. I have a lot of experience in dealing with change. It takes a long time for people to adjust to a new environment. There are lots of people who like the way that things were before, and they are experiencing quite a lot of change that they believe is uncomfortable. I recognise that we had some very pernicious cultural deficiencies in performance and how we engaged with our stakeholders, if I can put it that way, but, as a board, we have led a process where we have put a lot of effort into staff development. We also have a leadership programme that is about embedding a new culture — it is a one-region culture — of being open to and listening to our

stakeholders. I am very proud of the way that the board has pulled together. We now have a very improved relationship, particularly with school leaders. It did not start off in a good place. We were pitched into a financial crisis, pretty much in year 2, and schools were feeling the pain. They are still feeling the pain, but we have developed direct engagement with schools. No one is particularly happy with the environment in terms of the financial pressures that we are living through, but there is a shared understanding that we are all trying to move in the right direction to the benefit of children and young people.

We have thorough policy and procedure frameworks on issues, including whistle-blowing. If any member of staff feels uncomfortable or disadvantaged, there are very well-established processes for dealing with that. I am unaware of our having any serious issues in that regard.

Dr McMorran: When you look at the board and at how diverse it is, one thing that comes out is the level of passion. In response to the audit and everything else that went on, we felt a sense of shame, anger and frustration. Be in no doubt about that. It was about special needs children, whom I, for 36 years, have been involved with in east Belfast. It was not an easy thing to do. To try to go from the operational side when you are trying to be strategic became very difficult. It definitely needs to be looked at.

Mr Hilditch: I am looking at something more specific in the report — the appeals. They rose quite substantially. I think you indicated that they went up by a third — 30%, maybe. Sorry, that was the cases for statements; the appeals rose from 145 to 408, which is probably 125% of an increase. Can you identify something that was going wrong at that level with the statement and why the authority had to concede on some of those cases before they got to the tribunal?

Ms O'Connor: Part of the problem is that we do not have the data. We are seeing the very dramatic rise in the number of children coming forward to be statemented, but we do not know why that is. It is significantly higher here than it is in other jurisdictions. We have a deficiency at a regional in our knowledge of the need, the reason why the demands are coming to the extent that they are and their geography. Clearly, we have centres of population and do not necessarily have all our educational resources in the right locations, so there are lots of layers to this, which is why, to come back to my earlier point, we certainly need to look at our operational delivery. There is no doubt about that. We recognise that and are doing it. This needs a system-wide examination. It is not just about the procedures; there is a financial challenge. Our schools are challenged. We do not necessarily have the resources in the right places, and, fundamentally, it is very hard to plan for the future when you do not have a properly informed analysis to work from. I suggest that, as a region, we currently do not have that.

Mr Hilditch: Finally, we asked the authority this question, and the answer seemed to be no, but did the board look at the situation in any of the other devolved jurisdictions in the UK in order to learn from best practice there and to gain some experience of something that had been working for a longer period?

Ms O'Connor: Yes, we did indeed. I work in Scotland. I am involved in oversight and audit in local government in Scotland. As you are aware, local government in Scotland delivers educational services. There are many things there that we could benefit from. I mentioned the Doran review, which was a platform from which lots of innovation emerged in Scotland. We are better than some places and worse than others. There is something very significant about the increasing numbers of children that we have coming through, but we need to get that input, and Sara has already undertaken to work with the Local Government Association in England to examine its practices. I was bringing the Scottish experience and Sara was inviting expertise from England to see what we can learn from those experiences of delivery, and that work is ongoing.

Dr McMorran: Mr Hilditch, we were trying to use the expertise on the board, because there are quite a few retired or ex-principals involved in this. You have to step back to what you said. They started to realise that the reasons for this extended statutory assessment period were varied and vast due to the different reasons why kids need a statutory assessment, and, when you look into the details, you see that it gets to a point where you think this: is it any wonder, because, when you look at the number on the waiting list for a statement, you see that it [*Inaudible.*] Sara and her team have now grabbed this, and thankfully — this will sound ridiculous — due to the COVID situation, because they were not allowed to have meetings, they had more time to deal with the statements, and the number of statements on the waiting list has reduced because the people involved had more time to deal with them. If you have 1,000 cases and you need a meeting, you might be involving medical people, those

involved in speech and language, occupational therapy, physio and, in some cases, those who deal with mental issues, and it is massive undertaking. We will learn from the fact that we reduced the number to what it is now, and it is looking quite good at the minute. I cannot answer your point about appeals, because I think that the quote you got was 20 and now it has gone up to 400, so that is an amazement to me.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Andy and Sharon, for coming today. Hopefully, we do not keep you too late into the evening. There are two things. I recognise that the role of the board is to be strategic and not to be involved in operational matters. One of the ways to try to safeguard against risk is to have internal audit and a board audit subcommittee to look at audit and to do the necessary probes. Why do you feel that that internal audit element did not pick up some of these systemic issues?

Ms O'Connor: The first thing that I would say in response, Mr Muir, is that I believe that we have a robust ARAC. I am pretty confident in the systems and processes that are in place there, and, as Andy said, we have a very deep resource of expertise on the board. The reason why some of those things were not picked up on was because of the culture, which I mentioned. Governance processes can manage all the systemic things, such as processes and paperwork, and you can look at those. However, if the cultural issues behind that are not working to support the flow of information to the board and information being given to the board in the right format and way, there is very little that your governance system can do to manage that.

I have to say that it was not that the board was not aware that there were deficiencies. However, you need to ground your responses in some sort of evidence base. Thankfully, I have to say, the Audit Office report, the Children's Commissioner's report and our own internal audit gave us the platform to identify what was wrong and to then put in train a whole suite of interventions that we know are proving to produce benefits. It will then be the job of ARAC and members of the children and young people's committee to manage that progress. It was not that we were not getting reports; we were getting reports, but they were just not as informative as they ought to be.

Mr Muir: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I think that some elements of this are, perhaps, for closed session. The other element is that there was a Northern Ireland Audit Office report in 2017 and then, obviously, the most recent report. For the Audit Office to have produced a report on an issue in an organisation is quite significant. When a report like that arrives, it is not an internal audit — I do not want to devalue those — but is a quite significant audit report, which garners public interest. Obviously, the Audit Office has now come back to that report and produced a second report, which we are dealing with today. Are you, as a board, content? You have full oversight of the implementation of the recommendations in the 2017 report. That was quite a significant report. Are you, as a board, satisfied that you took full charge to ensure that that report was acted upon?

Ms O'Connor: As I said, there are two dimensions to that. We immediately took action. I have a list of a dozen interventions that the board made to deal with that. Notable among them was action that we took to review our practices on community engagement and external feedback. We also set up a transformation working group. We were involved, obviously, with the Department's programme board. We received minutes from it. We took assurance from it that, with regard to the terms of reference for the Department's programme board, it really was concerned with ensuring that action plans are delivered. Therefore, we were looking at it from that point of view, which seemed to be consistent with what we were being told in the departmental arrangements internally in EA. On that basis, we felt that progress was being made. I do not know that there was anything else that the board might have done that would give us any further insight. We believed that we were scrutinising effectively. We placed trust and confidence in the feedback that we were receiving.

Dr McMorrán: Andrew, in response to the Audit Office report, Sara and the senior liaison team had, obviously, spoken to the board and, I think, described it in a very positive way. They saw it as a great challenge function to move on. I felt that that was a very positive step.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Chair. I will probably have another question in closed session, if that is OK. That is fine. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): That is fine.

Mr Harvey: Thank you very much, Ms O'Connor and Dr McMorrán. The stage 3 backlog is due to rationing educational psychologists. Can there be a plan towards expanding that via additional specialists?

Ms O'Connor: I am sorry; the sound cut out at the beginning of your question. Can you repeat it for us?

Mr Harvey: The stage 3 backlog is due to rationing educational psychologists. Can there be a plan towards expanding that with additional specialists?

Ms O'Connor: Yes. As I mentioned, we have put in place a restructuring of our educational psychology service. Part of that was planning for the future to make sure that we are growing our own talent with educational psychologists. There was a complete remodelling of that service to try to free up front-line staff to work through the day-to-day backlog and manage it. I believe that the Committee has been in receipt of evidence that points to improvements in that area. I would like to leave it there, but I have to add that, in light of the new legislation, the new ambitions for turnaround times for statements and our continuing financial challenge, we need to be realistic about what is achievable in the long term.

Dr McMorran: We had a presentation from the new head of the educational psychology service. I was very lucky, because, in her earlier years, she was my school's educational psychologist and I have great confidence in her. You can understand the issue with stage 3. Up to stage 3 is dealt with by the school, and, once you are into stage 3, you then bring in the educational psychologist. As the new head of department, Mary made a great point when she said that the vast majority of time was being used in the assessment process. That was what was eating up all the time. They are now getting to the stage of quickening the process and making it more efficient. As you just asked, would it not be great if we could get more educational psychologists to come in to do that work? She is working with what she has now and on how not to make cuts but to be more efficient and effective in statementing. You are right that that is where the problem is: there is a backlog, and that backlog has been brought about because schools are waiting on the assessment. When the educational psychologist comes in, the process does not take just half an hour; it is not just a case of making an assessment and walking out. It can take weeks, and you should remember that it has to include the parents, which is where it becomes a very long and drawn-out situation. I should add that it also involves the health people.

Mr Boylan: You are very welcome. Thank you for your responses so far. Sharon, I want to tease out a few points. In the previous evidence session, I was trying to get at the system and structures that are in place, because they are key to how this is all rolled out. I understand that the board has a certain role, but I would like you to respond about your role and responsibility to deliver in the overall structures. I appreciate all the answers that you have given, but we are going by what is in the Audit Office report. What are your views on that?

Ms O'Connor: In the development of the board, we have been very active in trying to create the regional structure, which meant bringing together lots of people who had different working practices and very different internal cultures. We have put a lot of investment and energy into trying to create those teams. We now have a regional and subregional structure that is trying to work at a local level and is broken down into the configurations of council areas, so we have a more personal connection with those local services.

Where our own arrangements are concerned, we have reviewed our governance consistently. Every year, the board looks at its own performance, and we have made a number of changes to our structures. We charged the executive team with trying to formalise common structures across the region. We have not just encouraged the formality of the structures but have a raft of digital solutions that are radically improving our capacity in terms of the quality of the information that flows to the board and out to our stakeholders. We have also looked at how we can change the culture. We are trying to be an open and transparent organisation and to engage with stakeholders in a way that provides them with good-quality information. We have charged our team with trying to put in place those solutions.

I could talk for days about the various layers of that, Mr Boylan, because they are considerable. This is a huge organisation, as you will appreciate, but —.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that, Sharon. I wanted to ask that before I went on to ask questions on the Audit Office report. Andy, I share your frustration. We all heard the frustration in your voice in some of your answers, including those to Mr Beggs. Most of us are on boards of governors, and I have sat for 13 years on the all-party group on autism and have a personal interest in that area. We know how difficult the challenges are out there, and we are fighting for budgets all the time.

I want to concentrate on the Audit Office report. There is a long-established practice of working in silos and of having a silo mentality — it is referenced in the report — not only across directorates but in individual services. What are your views of that silo mentality? What are you doing to deal with it and to try to reduce it? You might say that there is no silo mentality, but I am going only by what the report tells me.

Dr McMorran: I will speak before Sharon answers. I sat on the committee that appointed the new chief executive, Sara Long. We talked about the Department of Education, the Education Authority, the Education Authority board, the schools and everything that goes along with that, and she said that she would target those silos that you talked about. She was right. There were silos, but she is targeting them with her senior leadership team.

You talked about developing a culture. That will not be done overnight, but she is making one hell of an effort with her senior team. The good thing is that she has involved the EA board and kept us informed. At the other end, she has involved the Department of Education. We need to work closer with it. I do not want to be a scapegoat or a nodding dog. I want to work together, especially when it comes to special needs.

Mr Boylan: Sharon, would you like to comment on that?

Ms O'Connor: I will add that that is part of the challenge of putting a big regional organisation together. It continues to be a challenge. The senior management team is now pretty much completely new and is made up of exceptionally able people. Right down to our assistant directors and heads of service, we have people who understand that they are part of one organisation.

Andy is right: we have to lead. That comes from the top. Sara is very committed and recognises the substance of what you said about silos. We fully appreciate that. However, it will not be the work of days to resolve that type of change process; it will take months or years. It is ongoing, and I would like you to be assured of that.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much for that. Andy, you said that there are many procedures, that 26 weeks is not that long and that you need medical reports and the involvement of health people etc. The sooner we join all that up, the better, because all of us want the best for each child. That is what it is about.

Dr McMorran: I could not agree more, but you have to understand that I worked in the system when it was 26 weeks. I was very lucky that my special needs department was very hard-working, but, even with that, those 26 weeks were a massive push.

It is about the different people that you have to deal with. I am not saying that they are poor at their job; I am saying that, when you bring in a mixture of health people, especially when it comes to mental problems, parents, teachers and the special needs department, an awful lot of people are involved, particularly educational psychologists.

I was told today that we are looking at 22 or 23 weeks. I was amazed, because I thought that 26 weeks was difficult enough. However, when I read the figure saying that it was over 100 weeks, I thought that that was a disgrace. That is shameful.

Mr Boylan: Absolutely, and that was why I wanted to bring up the silos.

I have another couple of specific points. The 10 recommendations have been mentioned. In your role, have you put in place any monitoring processes for the recommendations that you can help with?

Ms O'Connor: Picking up on the earlier point, a subcommittee of the board oversees the workings of the whole process. We are also party to the Department's committee that is working on those recommendations. At both ends of that relationship, we are working at board level and I, as the chair, am working with the Department and my executive colleagues on their oversight of those matters.

Mr Boylan: Finally, I want to ask about the gathering and accuracy of data and the IT system. Are you having any difficulties getting that data? Will you comment on its accuracy?

Ms O'Connor: It has radically improved. I am sure that Andy would agree with that.

Dr McMorran: Yes, the management information system has been a godsend for that.

In many ways, you are talking about accountability, and there is a role for the Department when it comes to the inspectorate. I know that the inspectorate had a problem that meant that, up until the union action with staff, it could not get into schools. It could not get into classrooms, but it could get into the principal's office, and most of the time when the inspectors came into my office when I was a principal, we managed to get an awful lot done.

The role of the inspectorate could be very important for the figures that you mentioned. That is where that relationship with the Department of Education will develop, although it will develop because Sara Long will let it develop and will work hard with whoever the new permanent secretary will be.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that, Andy, but we are just after listening to a presentation. If we go back to 2014 and the roll-out of all those things, we see that a lot more could have been done to put proper structures in place, but we are where we are now.

Finally, teachers and principals, in particular, are almost now like accountants and bank managers running school budgets, and we understand those pressures.

I appreciate your answers. Thank you very much.

Dr McMorran: You mentioned budgets. The one thing that got me was annual budgets. I could not cope with an annual budget because I was trying so hard to look to the future.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): No member has signalled that they want to ask any other questions in open session, so I take it that we are now finished in open session and will move into closed session. Is that OK, members?

Members indicated assent.