



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

14-to-19 Strategy: Pivotal

29 September 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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14-to-19 Strategy: Pivotal

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Nicola Brogan  
Mr Robbie Butler  
Mrs Diane Dodds  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr Daniel McCrossan  
Mr Justin McNulty  
Mr Robin Newton

**Witnesses:**

Dr Ben Harper	Pivotal
Ms Ann Watt	Pivotal

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** I welcome Ms Ann Watt, director of Pivotal, and Dr Ben Harper, research manager at Pivotal. I advise witnesses that the Committee will give you 10 minutes to make an opening statement. That will then be followed by questions from members. The floor is yours. Who is kicking off?

**Ms Ann Watt (Pivotal):** I will kick off, yes. Thank you to the Committee for the invitation to attend and present our recent research on education and skills for 14-to-19-year olds. I will make a few introductory remarks, but most of the introductory comments will be Ben talking about the report that we have just published.

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. We are about two years old. We operate outside politics, so we have no political alignment. We also operate outside government. Our aim is to promote better public policy here through encouraging more use of evidence in policymaking and by enabling more people to have a say on public policy issues. To that end, we do projects on policy issues, publish reports and facilitate discussion and input into policy. The new report that we published just yesterday on education and skills for 14-to-19-year olds is a good example of both of those things. It looks at the evidence of what works in education for that age group, and it gets views and ideas from young people themselves. You have, I think, two reports in front of you. We published a report yesterday that summarised the research we did with 300 young people. Previous to that, we published a policy review report at the end of 2020, so there are two separate reports, although they are connected.

The big headlines that we came up with in that report are young people telling us that they want to learn more about employability and life skills at school, rather than just being coached to do exams. The second area is that young people said that they wanted more innovative and accessible careers

advice, and the third area was raising the profile of vocational options rather than the more traditional academic routes. Ben will talk more about each of those things in a minute.

It is really good to be here today. It is important for us as a policy think tank to have an influence and an impact with the work that we do. There are two particular areas where I highlight that we would like the research and the ideas that we have come up with to have an impact. The first one is the new strategy on 14-to-19-year-olds that the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education are developing and will publish, I believe, in the next couple of months. We have had some good conversations with the officials who are working on that strategy, and we would like the research that we have done with young people in the real world, telling us about their real experiences, to have an influence on the decisions that are made in that strategy document. Secondly and, perhaps, slightly longer-term, we would like the research to have an influence on the independent review of education, the panel for which was announced just a couple of days ago. We will seek to make sure that we meet that panel and tell it what we have heard from young people about their experiences of the 14-to-19 education system.

I will hand over to Dr Ben Harper, who will talk in a little more detail about the research.

**Dr Ben Harper (Pivotal):** Thank you, Ann. Hopefully, everybody can see the slides. If there are any issues, let me know. I am conscious of members' time, so this is an overview of our key findings that, hopefully, will guide discussions and questions.

This is just a quick overview of our data collection. We were really keen to engage as many young people, parents, carers and stakeholders as possible. As Ann mentioned, we worked alongside the joint project leads from the Department of Education and DFE, who were working on the 14-to-19 strategy. As you can see from the slide, there is a range of young people, parents and carers from across schools and young people who are not in mainstream education or not in education at all. I will present the five main themes, and hopefully we can then discuss those in more depth. I have tried to pull out in each slide one of the main takeaway messages and the solutions that young people, parents and employers came up with.

On the first theme, we were really interested in how people develop employability and life skills. Given the emphasis on reinvigorating the economy and given the multiple reviews of education, we were really keen to think about where, young people believe, they obtain the best experience on employability and life skills. The percentages here are from over 235 participants, and multiple answers were permitted, just in case you are wondering why the percentages do not add up. You will see here that family is very important, and that is a really good theme to hold in mind throughout the discussion. As many of us will know, family is a big influence on young people's decisions to choose certain careers or skills and on their wider life skills, so involving the family unit is extremely important as we begin to move forward and think about possible policy changes. On the slide, you will see some solutions that our young people and parents came up with. There is an overall theme of trying to spend more time, in mainstream education or otherwise, on real-world learning, be that workplace visits or better relationships with employers and schools, and developing a real ethos of life skills in education. We recognise that that can be difficult, given the demanding nature of the content in the curriculum, and we might touch on that in a bit.

The second theme is on exploring the experience of careers guidance and advice. There is a quite a bit of information there. What was really important when we did the research was that there are many examples of excellent careers advice. Pivotal is about developing evidence that creates really innovative solutions and working alongside stakeholders. That is not to criticise people who provide careers advice now, but we noticed with young people and carers that the majority of people felt that guidance could be improved. One of the major issues for young people and parents with additional needs was the need to have more career support over an advanced period of time and it being much more practical, involving much more practical work experience for people with additional needs. The second solution is a consistent theme in our work and a real challenge developmentally: how do you respect young people's developmental needs and right to autonomy, particularly for the 16-to-17-year-old age group, but also recognise that young people live with parents and carers? It is important to involve parents and carers in a way that feels appropriate to the young person but also best supports their future development. Another significant theme in our research was the need for careers guidance to be much more aspirational — to move beyond the traditional careers of law, banking and medicine and be much more innovative. I have got a bit more information on that to talk about.

The third theme was exploring the understanding of career pathways and the labour market. We included those questions because it is really important to understand the baseline of the perceptions

of young people and their parents on what is available and where the growth and decline areas are. As you can see on the slide — hopefully you can read it OK — 69% of young people knew little to nothing about areas of growth and decline in the labour market. Young people felt quite disconnected from future planning, and I wonder whether that reflects the complex landscape of options. There is a tendency among young people to go for traditional subjects and choices. That is particularly problematic when those options are not available, for example, to kids with additional needs and those on the periphery of mainstream. That highlights the need for parental involvement and for parents and carers to feel upskilled and informed of the best options for their child or young person. Solutions to that include clear guidance on areas of growth and decline. We recognise that that is difficult. If you have young people aged 12 or 13, we cannot forecast what the growth areas will be in seven years' time when they hit the employment market, but there has to be some sort of middle ground. We are really interested in the idea of "train the trainer" initiatives with local employers, whereby experts in industry work with teachers and community leaders on areas where young people can work and contribute.

The fourth theme looked at attitudes towards further education (FE) and vocational pathways. One of the key stats for us was that 58% of parents and carers know little to nothing about apprenticeships. That marries in a concerning way with the theme of parents being extremely influential in their young people's decision-making. We were interested in young people's ideas of champions in further education. Quite a few young people said that we should get people who have gone down the FE pathway to come back into school to inspire other young people — that wider sense of increased visibility of further education in post-primary education seemed important — and suggested a targeted campaign to inform parents and carers of the diverse options in further education. We found that there is a tendency for further education to be seen as somewhere where young people go to repeat GCSEs and A levels, rather than understanding the unique offerings and expertise in further education.

Finally, we are really passionate about engaging marginalised groups. We met young people who were not in education, young people who had experience of local authority care and young people who were being supported between mainstream education and referral units. The stat you can see on the slide is drawn from wider government statistics on young people who are in mainstream education and those who have left care or who have experience of care. You will see a significant difference there that really amplifies the issue of young people with less privilege being much more likely to poorly achieve in education. Some of the youth agencies and teachers that we worked with suggested that improved teacher training on the complex needs faced by young people with special educational needs (SEN) and mental health issues might really support that. Also, there should be enhanced education for employers in recognising and valuing alternative education. Some of our employers told us that, whilst it is really good to have a range of diverse educational options, they sometimes found it hard to compare, particularly if you think about the range of the level 2 qualifications, which can be quite difficult to understand.

We were also really interested in young people's views on increasing youth participation in advocacy work, acknowledging that young people themselves are best placed to articulate to policymakers their needs and the changes that should be made. Using evidence from young people, parents and wider stakeholders, we have come up with three high-level policy recommendations that, I am sure, we will discuss. As you can see, the first recommendation is about employability and skills training. There should be a greater emphasis throughout the curriculum on preparing young people for life after education. Secondly, careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people, parents and carers. Finally, the status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers.

That is our brief summary.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Ann, do you want to come back in on anything, or will we start the questions?

**Ms Watt:** No, go ahead into the questions and discussion.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Fair enough. I will start. It may be just a perception — you may be able to confirm it or not — that, structurally, the education system in general seems to be weighted in favour of academic education — GCSEs and A levels and then higher education. In many ways, further education and vocational training are seen as the poor second cousin. Do you agree with that? Can anything be done to change that?

**Ms Watt:** Ben, do you want to answer that question? You are better placed to know the detail of the research.

**Dr Harper:** Certainly. My immediate thought as you were talking was the sense that we live in a traditional culture in Northern Ireland. We are socialised to early assessment with the transfer test. In many schools, the emphasis on attainment and assessment is heavy from an early stage. From age 13 or 14, young people are preparing for or holding in mind GCSEs, and then they move on to A levels and higher education.

The other issue that our research demonstrates is that young people, as, I guess, we know — maybe some of us are parents or work with young people — are very influenced by their parents and carers. There is quite a large piece of work to do on the mindset of parents and carers about what good education or training is. We find that parents and carers are extremely wary of newer areas of development such as cybersecurity, digital technology and advanced manufacturing. There is a big piece of work there, but I think there is a wider acknowledgement of the cultural issues that we experience in Northern Ireland. There is an attitude to further education whereby it is still seen as "the tech" rather than having a unique identity.

**Ms Watt:** That is right. I will add that there was a lack of knowledge about vocational options from both young people and parents and carers. There is a lack of knowledge, and therefore there is anxiety about those options that they might not be as safe or financially secure as the academic route. Actually, the irony is that, for some young people, the vocational route would be a much better and more secure choice, but they tend to be steered towards staying on an academic path because that is familiar. As Ben said, there is a lack of knowledge about the wider options, particularly in new areas of employment.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Where does the responsibility lie for that lack of knowledge? Has the system found it difficult to adjust? Is it not agile, and, especially in the grammar sector, is it geared towards examinations and young people going to university to do degrees? I also have a perception that most grammar schools — I do not suggest that they are all the same — are geared towards the professions, such as medicine, accountancy and law. They are professions that were in vogue 20, 30 or 40 years ago, and everyone aspired to that. However, there is now a much broader range of career pathways that young people can follow. Is there a particular problem in grammar schools in terms of their agility to deal with all of the new career pathways that are emerging?

**Dr Harper:** Do you want me to answer that, Ann?

**Ms Watt:** Yes, go ahead, if you can. It may be that we do not have data on grammar schools versus non-grammar schools.

**Dr Harper:** As Ann says, our study did not set out to compare post-primary schools, be they grammar or otherwise. My hypothesis is that it is not necessarily a grammar school problem per se; it is across the education sector. You very much highlighted the difficulty of how to prepare for the future when there can be an over-reliance on traditional career pathways. Another important point is that, although young people who complete A levels have a view towards higher education, we know from research that many young people who do not receive the grades that they want go on to do higher education in Great Britain or elsewhere. There is a key point there whereby further education, with better development, networks and links with schools, could really pick up many of those young people and offer them viable alternatives to higher education elsewhere.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** OK. *[Inaudible.]*

**Ms Watt:** Sorry, Chair; I am not hearing you. I do not know whether others are.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** I apologise; I was on mute.

Just in relation to careers advice in school, I have a son who recently went through the education system. He is in his early 20s now. My view was that they did not get extensive careers advice in that school. I am talking about just one school, so obviously I am not suggesting that it is the same across the board. Careers teachers seemed to be teachers who taught another subject and had the added responsibility of giving out careers advice. I presume that they received some sort of training, but I felt

that the training from the careers guidance teachers was not sufficiently extensive and that they did not have sufficient knowledge about particular career pathways so that they could give sufficient advice to pupils. What is your view of that?

**Dr Harper:** That is something that certainly came up in our research. It is very much a structural issue. Some schools will use that budget on a dedicated careers teacher or, indeed, a careers department. However, it is more common that teachers have multiple responsibilities and do careers teaching as part of those responsibilities. It is a huge issue. I want to be cautious about criticism. It is not about criticising the teachers who do that, but one has to wonder about the capacity of one individual to provide such an extensive range of careers advice whilst holding down other responsibilities in the education system.

All young people have access to the Careers Service, which sits separate to school and comes into schools. We would like to see more dedicated time and resources to careers advice in school. There was certainly a consistent message from the careers teachers whom we interviewed and who completed our survey around a lack of resources, be it time or money, to dedicate to really high-quality careers advice.

**Ms Watt:** There was a clear sense in the research that young people wanted more than just a one-off careers interview. They wanted, as Ben said, advice that was more available to them in an ongoing sense and starting at an earlier stage of their journey through school.

One significant stat in our report is that 70% of careers teachers said that they had insufficient time to keep up to date with skills in demand and labour market information. Again, this is not a criticism of careers teachers, but they say that they just do not have the capacity or the time in their jobs to know where the growth sectors in the economy are and what they should steer young people towards. There is certainly some kind of capacity and knowledge issue there about what information careers teachers have.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Thanks for that. It seems that there is a need to build capacity into the system somewhere and have dedicated careers teachers who are able to keep up to speed with new information in the economy and in the jobs market. Thanks for that. Diane, do you wish to ask some questions?

**Mrs Dodds:** I do indeed. The Committee will be well aware that this is an area that I raise frequently and regularly. Ben, the report that you talked about is a really interesting but valuable snapshot of what young people think about how we are doing around careers advice. It is a really complex area, and many things feed into it that have gotten us to where we are today.

Going back to some remarks that Pat made, fundamentally we have conditioned young people to think that the best route for them and for their prospects is to go to university and get a degree — any degree — even though that degree at a university may well cost them a huge amount of money that they will be paying back for a long time. Some stats that you have just given us jump out at me as being worrying, and we should be concerned about them. Like you, I am not apportioning blame. It is a complex problem that we need to dissect carefully as we look at what the solutions might be on a number of levels.

It is really significant that only 31% of those young people thought that schools gave them information and knowledge about employability and lifetime skills. If education is about anything, it is about preparing the whole person for their lifetime ahead of them. That is significant. Only 20% of those young people found careers advice helpful, and 79% thought that careers advice could be improved. Some careers teachers that I know teach careers part-time and have to manage other responsibilities in the school. The staggering statistic is that 69% of those young people knew little or nothing about growth areas in the economy. I would like your thoughts on that, because that is pretty staggering.

**Dr Harper:** Thank you for that feedback. I fully agree with you when you highlight the complexity of the issue and, for me, the interconnectedness of the issue. I will highlight it again that many careers advisers give excellent careers advice, but some young people felt that careers advice could be improved, and you can clearly see that correlation with young people who do not know about future growth areas and declining areas. The other statistic that I will bring in is parental knowledge and confidence on the issue. When you bring those issues together, we have a problematic snapshot of careers provision and employability.

There is a huge cultural issue in education in Northern Ireland and, of course, beyond whereby attainment is seen as the goal. You get your 10 As at GCSE, you get your A levels and you go to university. As you said, Mrs Dodds, many young people will do a degree because they are almost socialised to that pathway to go and do a degree, no matter what that degree is, and there may be much more socially and economically satisfying options available to young people. We hope to pick that up in our next research project, which is about retaining and regaining talent in higher education. I agree that it is a combination of factors. It is complex. There are small steps and small solutions that may help. We have made numerous recommendations. One that jumps out for me is that we met many employers and stakeholders who were passionate about employing young people in local communities, often in small towns. They want much better relationships with schools. They want to provide work placements and come in and give little sessions about why it is good to work in manufacturing or textiles. They found that some schools were more focused on the assessment end. There is a nimble bit of work to do whereby schools could be a bit more open to local employers to work alongside careers advisers to boost interest in innovation in this area.

**Mrs Dodds:** I agree. This is a complex area of policy, but some things could be done. I have submitted a motion to the Assembly on schools.

First, we need to bring together the stakeholders so that there is a more coherent response to the skills gaps in the economy and how we filter that down to schools. Work could be done on how we shape the curriculum. It is staggering and worrying that 69% of young people had no idea what the growth area in the Northern Ireland economy is. Northern Ireland is slowly but surely transforming itself into a high-level manufacturing and tech economy. That is where the future skills and jobs are. We probably need to look at how we mainstream some of that into the curriculum so that it is part of what young people do. When I was Minister, I talked about the digital spine for Northern Ireland; in other words, young people understood this and the language from an early age. There are things that we can do there.

What would you advise on that transition between school and further education?

**Dr Harper:** It is a complex policy issue. We found pockets of really good practice, particularly in schools that had support from third sectors — the Prince's Trust, for example. Those schools worked with young people who were on the edge of mainstream academically and socially and did engagement programmes with further education. In those schools, there were excellent relationships between the host school and the FE college.

Some schools and young people need to see it to believe it. We talk about manufacturing and digital skills, and, of course, I agree. However, for some young people and, possibly, teachers, it feels too abstract. There is work to be done on making those options tangible. Young people can look at them and think, "Oh, that's what that means. This course leads to that. This qualification is useful for this type of career".

I see a large piece of work on engagement between FE and schools. Our recommendations include drawing on and engaging with a network of past pupils who went to further education and were successful. They are small, tangible steps, but what I know from working with young people is they need to see it to believe it. If you cannot see it, it is just too abstract.

**Mrs Dodds:** Is there work to be done between FE colleges and schools at, say, the age of 14, where there is greater access to the colleges and the provision? Is that a solution or part of the solution? Some of the problems are systemic and will take for ever to work out. Are there quick wins that can help us along the way? Is that a solution?

**Dr Harper:** Yes, that could be a quick win. It could be visit days or visit afternoons. There is also an argument for embracing some of the rapid technological changes that happened during the pandemic. It might be Skype-ing in or making short videos of a day in the life of or an afternoon in the life of somebody on a certain course or profession. Many of the teachers we worked with were keen to do that.

I am often struck by the culture of some schools where employability can be seen as something that you do when you finish your A levels. It is not necessarily culturally seen as being part of the whole-person development.

**Mrs Dodds:** It is incredibly interesting research. Why do you think 58% of parents and carers knew nothing about apprenticeships?

**Dr Harper:** I would hypothesise that the landscape is really complex for some parents and carers. As a parent, I look at the options, and, unless I have a family member or have read up a lot on it, it can feel really abstract. For example, I wonder what a level 2 qualification in advanced manufacturing means to many parents. Does that mean factory work? Does it mean IT work? It needs to be much more tangible.

The other statistic with that percentage is that parents often feel disengaged from careers advice. Some parents will tell us that their child had careers advice on a Monday and they did not hear about it for weeks afterwards. It can happen in quite a vacuum of the young person's life. Therefore, we need more intervention points where parents can ask questions and support young people. That is particularly the case for young people with additional needs or who are not on the high-flying academic pathway. In my view, parental involvement is extremely important.

**Mrs Dodds:** Did those young people see a difference between traditional careers advice in school and the independent careers advice service?

**Dr Harper:** No; in fact, many young people and some teachers were confused about the difference and, particularly in the focus groups, found it hard to work out who was related to what. I guess that they knew the teacher from their school, but some young people reported that they had limited to no engagement with centralised careers advice.

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, that is worrying.

**Dr Harper:** Linked to that, some young people had not done work experience. Teachers told us that that was not necessarily a pandemic-related issue, but they had got too far on in the curriculum to do a work placement or there were simply not enough placements to go on. We see a real value in a centralised work placement hub where young people get tasters or small flavours of experience rather than the traditional one or two weeks. We are preparing young people for a portfolio career that many young people or, indeed, adults will have where they will not stick in one job for the rest of their life.

**Mrs Dodds:** I promise to my colleagues that this is my last question. Did any of those young people have any knowledge of higher-level apprenticeship schemes?

**Dr Harper:** Not to my knowledge. It was not discussed. Apprenticeships generally were seen as being quite vague. The most concrete example that people had was if they knew somebody in their community who had done one. In those instances, they were what I would describe as the traditional apprenticeships such as hairdressing and plumbing. There was no real understanding that that has broadened out to a diverse range of innovative apprenticeships.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you. That is interesting.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Thank you, Diane. I agree that it is interesting research.

Daniel, would you like to ask a question? I know that you need to go early.

**Mr McCrossan:** I have to nip out, but I will be back in about 30 minutes. I have a thing to attend.

This is a fascinating discussion. It has me gripped. I was trying to remember the quality of the careers advice that I received. People can make up their own mind if it was good or bad. I remember having so many questions, and there were not enough answers because, as Diane and Pat said, it was often the teacher who taught a different subject. They were expected to do it on the side, almost to tick a box, if I can be as crude as that. It really needs to go way beyond that to ensure that young people are well aware of the options available to them and the skills necessary to fill the gaps in the market.

You told us that there is a need for real-world learning and better relationships between employers and schools and a need to create a better ethos of life skills in education. Will you describe "real-world learning" and how it can be accredited to a young person? How can better relationships be built between employers and schools?



**Dr Harper:** On the first point, 55% of our young people found work-based learning experiences to be the most helpful aspect of careers advice. It is something that they really want. We saw good practices and examples of where young people spent an afternoon, a day or longer at local employers, be they factories or innovation labs in digital technology, and were able to say, "Right, this is what this means. If you work in advanced manufacturing, this is a day in the life of it". We were particularly impressed that some employers stayed in contact with the school or class to let them know what opportunities were available and the best route to that job if they wanted to do it. It felt as though, if young people were able to actually do it, see it and have little experiments in applying those skills, they were much more likely to be engaged and interested.

There is a possible missing puzzle piece with regard to involving parents and carers. The skills and abilities of young people are broad. However, many might come home and not mention anything for days or weeks on end. If parents were engaged or given some information, they might be able to support the young person to take the steps towards that.

What was your second question?

**Mr McCrossan:** Is there a way of accrediting that to ensure that it is worthwhile or going well?

**Dr Harper:** Some organisations do. The Prince's Trust does some accredited placements. I am a bit cautious about that. I wonder whether we would be doing things to get assessed and graded in order to get a qualification. I see it more about real-world learning as part of the curriculum. In the report's view, that is as essential as obtaining your GCSEs and A levels. Time must be made for it to be seen as really good practice.

**Mr McCrossan:** I totally agree.

What do you mean by creating a better ethos of life skills in education, and how can that be created?

**Dr Harper:** That is a really good question. The ethos idea is a long-term and, probably, ambitious one. It is about creating a culture in which skills, employability, problem-solving and the things that we use in employment all the time are central to the curriculum. They are in the Northern Ireland curriculum. Some schools tell us that they use them, and some say that that is an essential part of day-to-day and week-to-week teaching planning. That was less clear in other schools. Some young people said, "We do all of that stuff around problem-solving and team-working outside of school". They did not see that as part of education, which is worrying. It is interesting that the young people whom we worked with who were in sports clubs or after-school clubs had much more of a sense of why those skills were important. Although it is great that they do that after school, it is important that we think about the centrality of that in the mainstream curriculum.

**Mr McCrossan:** That is worrying. I totally agree.

You want to enhance the visibility of further education in post-primary education. Why does FE currently not have greater visibility? Do you think that there could be a role for FE in primary education?

**Dr Harper:** Yes to both. There could be more visibility. Many of the recommendations apply to the primary area. There is less visibility because, broadly, there is a cultural issue in some, but not all, grammar schools where the destination for young people is highly selective universities that are often outside Northern Ireland and FE just is not on their radar; it is not something that they promote by having FE representatives attend. The other side of that is that schools that may have less emphasis on academic attainment have excellent relationships. We would like to see consistency or a broadening out of that so that you do not run the risk of being a victim of a school that may be just focused on academic attainment, which is useful but is not the be-all and end-all. The FE reps whom we worked with were keen to work with all schools and sectors, but they said that some schools had somewhat of a closed door to engagement with FE courses.

**Mr McCrossan:** There is also the primary-school element. From a very young age, children will tell you what they want to be when they are older. Schools should encourage children from a young age and reassure them that they can be anything that they want in life if they work hard enough to achieve it. If that happens from primary school onwards, we will see considerable benefits throughout post-primary.

Chair, if you bear with me, I have two more brief questions, and then I will leave you in peace.

Careers education and guidance was significantly reformed after the 2013 inquiry. In your opinion, did the reformation bring any success? What areas remain to be improved? How does your research using youth voices feed into that?

**Dr Harper:** There are lots of points there. It is difficult to say whether it was a success because, as I understand it, it was not evaluated so there were multiple recommendations, many of which were excellent and very tangible. To my knowledge, there is no published evaluation of that, which is difficult because we cannot say from an evidence-based think tank perspective what was a success and what was not. Anecdotally, we have heard that some themes or some ethos were implemented by some schools, particularly the idea about better relationships with employers and more connection to varied work experience. Some of the more transformational aspects of that document and, indeed, that huge piece of work do not appear to have been implemented and certainly not consistently

**Mr McCrossan:** That is interesting. That is why keeping a close eye on it and ensuring that the system has improved is vital. How do you measure that? How do you know the effectiveness of each school? How do you know if one school is doing it better than the other? It is not entirely straightforward.

This is an important question, and then that will be me. The Northern Ireland curriculum has not faced significant revision in well over a decade, which is a key contributor to this problem. In your opinion, does it reflect the knowledge, skills and transferable competencies required to equip our young people to live in a modern society?

**Dr Harper:** There are two bits to that. There is the bit about the content and the bit about consistent implementation. One would wonder if a curriculum that was designed 10 years ago is fit for purpose. I have not explored it as part of the research, so I cannot comment with any authority. You would wonder whether there are elements of that that could be updated, particularly digital skills and the wider transferable and problem-solving life skills that we discussed.

The big issue in our and others' research is how consistently that is taught. It is a framework and rightly so. You could be in an area where there are four schools and things like The World Around Us will be taught differently, rightly so. There is a concern that, in that aspect of the curriculum, a lack of impact measures may mean that it is kicked down the lane, almost as if it were something to be done at the end of school: you do your week's placement, get your one-off appointment with the careers adviser, and that is it. I am not one to introduce measures for measures' sake, but I would wonder whether there needs to be more scrutiny of the implementation of that aspect of the curriculum as well as the usual revision.

**Mr McCrossan:** I agree. I am not being critical of schools, but you were right when you said that a lot of schools are focused on ensuring that their kids get the best possible grades because it reflects well on the school. However, there should be a wider conversation and a stronger focus on development for the real world.

Finally, I know that you said that you have not researched it, but, if you were asked how you would change the curriculum or the Minister of Education asked, "What three recommendations would you make?", what would they be?

**Dr Harper:** This is like one of those game show questions. The first would be the implementation of a more rounded life skills programme starting in primary school. That is essential for academic attainment. From my experience in youth offending, I know that many young people do not understand that the skills that are really boring in school — English, maths and science — are essential. Many young people, particularly young men, think that they do not need those or are not interested in them. If they could be brought to life in a primary-school format onwards, young people could understand their importance. That would be really useful.

I might have to pass over to Ann on recommendations 2 and 3. Another element for me is the sense of what makes a good outcome and the outcomes being much broader in the curriculum. The emphasis is less on assessment and more on acquisition and application. By that I mean that, with literacy, numeracy and so on, there is less assessment of those skills and more assessment and understanding of their application in real-life settings, be that in small groups of young people, in the employment market or in the education system. In my opinion and, indeed, in multiple research

projects, there is a lack of criticality in many curriculums, not just in Northern Ireland. We need to move away from teaching content to teaching higher-order critical thinking skills. It is concerning that many young people who enter higher education will have to do that sort of training because it has been missing in post-primary.

**Mr McCrossan:** I will come in on the back of that before Ann comes in. We have a lot of young people coming to us for work experience, and, as politicians, we engage with young people all the time. I have found a huge difference in generations of young people in that, when people my age were going through school, we did not have all of these devices and we did not have computers to the same extent. We did not have them at our fingertips. Communication has changed. I have found that young people find it a wee bit more difficult to communicate face to face, and that, potentially, creates a considerable issue in preparing that person for the world of work, if you like, in many respects. I have noticed that there is a nervousness and anxiety amongst some young people when it comes to face-to-face communication, which will be an issue when it comes to the world of work.

**Ms Watt:** That is a really interesting point. We did not look at that, but it could be an important generational issue.

To go back to your question about the most important policy change, I will follow up on what Ben finished on about general skills for life and work. The more I go on in work and in life, the more I see that the people who succeed are those who have transferable skills, who can communicate well, who can organise themselves, who can work with different people, who can solve problems and who have digital skills. It is not the people who have a GCSE in geography or French. It seems to me that we are missing a huge set of life and work skills because we are so focused on exams. We would do much better if we had a curriculum that taught geography and French but taught them in ways that enabled young people to develop the skills that they can use in the workplace. It seems that, at the minute, we have a narrow academic focus.

**Mr McCrossan:** That is a critical point. Really good. Thank you all. That was helpful. It got my full attention.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Is Robin Newton still with us?

**Mr Newton:** Chair, yes, I am here. I have an unstable network connection and have been off and on five times now, I think. I can hear but cannot see, so I missed Ben's presentation.

I thank Ben and Ann for coming this morning. The report is very interesting. There is a need for our society to separate in the mind of parents, mostly, and, maybe, young people the difference between further and higher education and the full potential of a career pathway in both further education and higher education. We need to enhance the status of vocational training overall and the status of the engineer in society vis-à-vis the status of the solicitor or the doctor. Our society needs to prioritise the status of folk in those fields.

I remember going to schools as part of my employment and trying to enhance careers advice. That is a difficult task, because, as others mentioned, that role is given very much to one or two teachers, depending on the size of the school, and the information is stored in the library and made available if pupils wish to seek it out.

I welcome the report; it is a foundation worthy of being built on. I have a few questions that seek information. Page 5 of the 2020 Pivotal report 'Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years old' has the headline:

*"A failure to increase the overall baseline of educational achievement in Northern Ireland will leave young people vulnerable to future unemployment."*

Will you expand on that and on the three areas of growth you highlighted? I was surprised to see the areas of decline you highlighted, because I would think that global tourism, hospitality and arts and culture were areas not of decline but of potential, post-pandemic, of course. Will you comment on that paragraph?

**Dr Harper:** Are we talking about the first report?

**Mr Newton:** Yes.

**Dr Harper:** Perfect. The first point is on the failure to increase the overall baseline of educational attainment, leading to young people being vulnerable. People will be familiar with the finding from our desktop review and other research that the number of young people entitled to free school meals who educationally underachieve and do not attain the basic GCSE outcome, which we outline on page 3, attain a much lower level than those who are not.

The point relates to a real concern about those young people being left behind and about how we should be more aspirational. Level 2 qualifications will not be sufficient for our future labour market because of automation, artificial intelligence and the fourth industrial revolution. That is very much linked to what former Minister Dodds said about the digital spine, which means that young people will simply be left behind and the baseline of educational underachievement that we have now could significantly rise.

The data on areas of growth and decline is from the Economic Policy Centre (EPC), and we just reported that. I hear what you say about hospitality, arts and culture and tourism. I wonder whether those decline areas are in the context of the pandemic. Your point also raises how to keep data live. Whilst at the time of that report, those areas were in decline, in three or four months' time, hopefully, they will not be. That presents a key challenge to careers teachers, young people and parents.

**Mr Newton:** Thank you for that. The headline on page 8 of that report — I am still looking at the first report — is:

*"Investment in high quality post-16 skills and training options generates significant economic return."*

Have you any idea how Northern Ireland matches up against any other nation, particularly in the UK, on investment in post-16 skills?

**Dr Harper:** I do not have the data to hand. That statement refers to work that we did to explore the Scottish system, which has a significant economic investment in education and skills and an enhanced linking of the skills strategy with economic policy. However, I do not know how we compare. That is detailed on that page, where we talk about the Skills Development Scotland (SDS) service.

**Mr Newton:** Does that mean that we do not know whether Northern Ireland is in a good position or a less good position compared with other parts of the UK or Europe?

**Dr Harper:** Per person, I do not have the data available to say whether Northern Ireland is contributing more or less to skills development in young people in that age group. Ann, is there anything you want to add to that?

**Ms Watt:** We do not have the specific data on that. We can point to the general point about skill levels in Northern Ireland being lower than the UK average and there being a predominance of people here with few or no qualifications. The concern we highlighted in the most recent report is that people with few or no qualifications and very low levels of skills will struggle in future labour markets when there is greater automation and so on, as Ben mentioned.

**Mr Newton:** The paragraph is headed:

*"Investment in high quality post-16 skills".*

I made the point to the Finance Minister in the Chamber yesterday that we in the Assembly are offering a number of apprenticeships in the Civil Service. It is a small number vis-à-vis the size of the labour force in the Civil Service, but there is a need for us to address two areas. I accept what your report says on the high-quality end for those post-16, but we also need to address entry levels into further education or employment so that they are not based on academic qualifications and can provide a pathway for young people who are not able to show an academic record.

**Ms Watt:** In the current system, there is a definite need to offer better support to young people who do not achieve the standard of five GCSEs and fall behind and so on. There is a definite need to look at the particular circumstances of those young people and to try to understand why they are not

achieving. In both our reports, we highlight how you need to look at the wider issues in a young person's life to see what is holding them back — is it a family issue, a housing issue or a health issue that they are struggling with? — and offer them more rounded and holistic support in order to enable them to get back on track and achieve the basic qualifications.

**Mr Newton:** I would describe that as a dual approach. That is interesting.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you, Ann and Ben, for the chance to meet again. I genuinely echo the points made by some other members, and I thank you for the report, which is very timely. There is a passion on the Committee for these issues, so your report is welcome.

One of the first things I would like to look at is something that you, Ben, possibly started to talk about in answer to Daniel's line of questioning. Traditionally, we have discussed the academic route and the vocational route as though they are different entities and say that the choice is either/or. However, from my perspective — you started to hint at this — it is not either/or; there could and should be a blended approach. Can either of you guys expand a bit more on that?

**Dr Harper:** Definitely. There is a sense that, as you say, it can be quite binary. It is either/or. We found some really good examples in Switzerland, where equal weight is given to work-based learning alongside vocational learning. There is societal status related to that. It is called the dual technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The details are in the report. It is really interesting that, in that approach and others, the policy specifically aims to give them equal status and to remove the binary issue of doing either one or the other.

Some of the thinking behind the introduction of T levels in England was that technical training levels would remove the sense that vocational learning is for non-academic people. That is another policy innovation that may be worth considering in our context. It would require something quite structural to help young people and their parents to see that it is not one or the other.

You can argue that the binary issue is quite dated. I am thinking about discussions that Ann and I have had with other members. In the world of work, in my view, it does not matter if you have a doctorate or 10 GCSEs; if you cannot work with people, problem-solve or manage a challenge, it is extremely problematic. You may wonder if there needs to be a general move towards less binary qualifications.

**Mr Butler:** I will add some testimony to that. It is really important, and I railed against it in my former employment. I had 16 very successful years in the Fire and Rescue Service. I did not aspire to work there; I just ended up there. When I applied in late 1999 and was successful in February 2000, you did not need GCSEs. I did not have and still do not have any GCSEs. The service added the GCSE entry requirement for a job that is more vocational than academic. There is a barrier there, and it is an unnecessary barrier at times. Employers like that in the statutory sector can do a lot more.

What was your engagement like? Did you engage with the Civil Service or agencies like the police or the Fire and Rescue Service to get their input about what they thought would be a good pathway for young people to have careers with them?

**Dr Harper:** That is a very important point about the recognition of qualifications that are alternatives to GCSEs. Many employers we worked with were quite confused about the range of options. We were really impressed with the work the Prince's Trust does to engage with young people who are not on the pathway for traditional GCSE acquisition and who do alternative, vocational-based and life skill-based qualifications. The standardisation of GCSEs as a norm is problematic, because many young people struggle to attain them, and, as you say, for those who do, that is not a reflection of their ability to do the role.

We met the project leads for the Department of Education and DFE on that topic. Unfortunately, nobody from the police or the Fire and Rescue Service took part. They were invited to, but, unfortunately, they did not take part.

**Mr Butler:** No problem; that is something.

I do not know if you have a position on this point or whether it has been absolutely proven, but there has been a cultural change. It was not unusual for someone in my generation to leave school, get a job and stay in that job for 30 or 40 years. They might have had two or possibly three jobs. Is there

any evidence to suggest that young people who have left school in the past 10 years have multiple jobs in multiple different arenas? I am not suggesting that is the case, but I think that, anecdotally, it might be. If that is the case, are we looking at promoting lifelong learning and starting to get the message about that out? Do you suggest that we start that message in post-primary schools to make young people more aware that, whilst they may be focused and challenged in one way, that does not necessarily have to be the only way? Is that necessarily a good thing, because we have flux in the workforce and we have become multi-skilled as opposed to being specialised in certain areas?

**Dr Harper:** There are multiple points there. The bit I can definitely comment on from a data perspective is that we did some research in higher education that looked at leavers with a degree and their work patterns. Many think tanks have worked on that. As you say, it is very common for people to have multiple jobs and to geographically move quite a bit. That is the norm. There is quite a complex issue with whether they do that through choice and whether it is good practice to learn your skills and work across different sectors or whether, for some young adults, that is a reflection of a volatile labour market and poor working conditions, with people moving from one temporary contract to the next. There is insufficient data to answer that.

I am aware of other research outside our own that shows that transferable skills lead to better employment outcomes. As Ann mentioned, somebody can have classic training in x or y, but if they do not have the ability to be fluid with those skills, it is problematic. In my experiences in higher education, I see that many graduates require support to do that at age 22 or 23. One might wonder whether, if more time and focus was put into that at primary school and post-primary school, you would be working upstream rather than trying to correct an issue, particularly for young people who have gone through a very academic route. Many young people may never have had a part-time job and may not have done team sports because the focus was on academic attainment.

**Mr Butler:** Guys, I apologise for asking this question; it is genuinely not a political question, and I do not want you to answer politically. The reality is that we have had political instability for a number of decades, and that has probably led to a dilution of opportunity. For instance, businesses may not have invested here in a number of decades, and Brexit and the protocol have obviously thrown a potential spanner in the works in terms of giving our young people opportunities. Was that picked up in the studies at all? Were opportunities for young people and pay rates here compared with those on either the mainland or in the Republic of Ireland? Very often, we come down at the lower end of the scale, unfortunately. How important is political stability in ensuring good outcomes and opportunities for our young people in Northern Ireland?

**Dr Harper:** From this study and other work we have done as a think tank, it is clear that one of the casualties of instability, or a lot of change, is that there is a failure to systematically implement and evaluate evidence-based policy. As discussed, the large piece of work that was done on careers advice and working with multiple stakeholders was really good, but, unfortunately, due to government change, instability and changing government priorities, it is difficult to know how successful that was and how it was implemented.

There was also a huge piece of work, linked to this study, on higher education and student places. Previous Ministers did really good work on consultation documents. In 2015, there was the Big Conversation on the sustainability of higher education. Unfortunately, nothing was taken forward on that due to changes in government. It is certainly not a criticism of government, but the fact is that the lack of stability leads to difficulties in implementing policies and could lead to the creation of lots of strategies that, due to change, are never implemented. Ann may want to come in on that.

**Ms Watt:** I echo what Ben said. Our observation, as a public policy think tank that takes a lot of interest in how government functions in Northern Ireland, is that a lot of strategies and policies are written but there is no focus on ensuring they are delivered. That is a very important feature to note about how government works in Northern Ireland. There have been years of economic strategies, skill strategies and education strategies, but there is a tendency to publish a strategy and then to not follow up on what happens and ask whether it brings about change. Ben highlighted a couple of examples we have come across where there has been no evaluation of a very big-scale policy document or, indeed, where there has been a big-scale consultation like that with the Big Conversation on higher education in 2015. That was a really open conversation about higher education funding and government funding coming from tuition fees and so on — it was a very good piece of work — but it did not go anywhere. There is a big issue for government on how effectively it follows through on policy and strategy commitments.

**Mr Butler:** I have a final question, and thank you for your indulgence, Deputy Chair. The Committee has a passion for children with special educational needs (SEN). There are pathways for them, and any society will and should be measured against how it treats those who need most assistance. Was any detail picked up in the study or something that might be looked at again about the pathways for those who probably need lifelong additional assistance as opposed to those with slightly *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* difficulties but more severe?

There are some great projects out there. We have organisations like Stepping Stones in Lisburn and so on; there are different excellent projects. We still have many young people who are maybe not realising their full potential. Was that picked up?

**Dr Harper:** Two issues on that jump out for me. The post-16 provision, much as you indicate, is very inconsistent. Many schools and parents we spoke to highlighted a real anxiety about what was going to happen with the young people from the age of 12 or 13 onwards, and they asked what their training opportunities and choices are.

The second thing we found, which is very much linked to wider research on the pandemic and the evolving high street, was that the jobs and roles for people with additional needs are disappearing. The traditional retail roles or agencies that employ people with additional needs are in decline. There needs to be urgent consideration of how people with additional needs have fulfilling lives.

I see a huge role in automation, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing for people with additional needs. With more support and training, many people with additional needs could be involved in those sectors. We need to be much more aspirational for our children with additional needs than confining them to a lifetime of day hospitals or activity centres with no real focus.

**Mr Butler:** If you have any reports or anything about AI and automation, maybe you could direct them to me. If there is anything at all, such as a link, please share it with the Committee. We would be really grateful. Thank you.

**Ms Brogan:** Thanks, Ann and Ben, for your presentation and for the research. It is really interesting. I am glad we have had the opportunity to discuss it this morning.

How effective has the Department of Education been in preparing young people for the world of work? What areas require greater investment? Those could be, for example, digital skills and maybe even STEM subjects. Do you see those areas requiring further or greater investment?

**Dr Harper:** Stepping back from that, there is the bigger issue of how we make employability, life skills and careers more tangible and effective across subjects. Whilst the areas you mentioned are areas of growth, we have to think about consistency. We found programmes like Super Science, which promotes STEM, particularly that involving young women, and that is great. However, we need to think about consistency in Northern Ireland. There needs to be a consistent approach to upping the overall standard of careers, employability and life skills across education. That is a major priority for the Department of Education. I know from working with the project leads there that they are keen to develop much more consistency in that and centralised approaches to work experience.

In our research, young people are telling us they want to know more. They want work-based learning, but not enough young people get that opportunity. That is a real starting point. The areas you mentioned are very important, but there is a temptation in Northern Ireland to go down silos of specific areas and ignore the bigger picture of achievement and well-being.

**Ms Brogan:** Grand, Ben. That is fair enough, and I will come back to that point in a minute. How effective has the Department been in helping to prepare young people for the world of work?

**Dr Harper:** That is a really big question. It would be naive of me, on the basis of our research, to evaluate the whole Department's effectiveness. There is a larger issue about the implementation and evaluation of policies and strategies. Whilst it is great that there has been revised attention to educational underattainment in Northern Ireland, with huge investment and resource going into those areas and with findings that are interesting and relevant, it is essential that that learning is then applied and evaluated. Otherwise, we may be tempted to get into another strategy cycle. I am particularly conscious of the independent review of education, which will explore higher education and the 14-19 age group. There is a concern that its recommendations will not be put in place until possibly 2030, or

in and around then. In the meantime, short steps are outlined in our report that, we are confident, could make some real evidence change in education.

**Ms Watt:** I will add to that. In doing an overall assessment of how well we are preparing young people in Northern Ireland, anyone looking at education will point to the attainment gap, which Ben mentioned, between young people who are entitled to free school meals and those who are not. Educational outcomes are so influenced by socio-economic background, and that has been an issue for many years. There have been many strategies written about it, including a new one a couple of months ago. The focus on the issue is absolutely welcome, but that is an example of a lot of policy analysis and thinking done and documents published. There has, however, been a lack of concentrated focus on ensuring delivery of change. In, I think, June, there was a new report from an expert panel titled 'Closing the Gap — Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment'. This time, we must have a sustained focus on making sure that change is brought about and that outcomes are improved, rather than be coming back to the issue in five years' time and saying, "Let's do another review".

**Ms Brogan:** I completely agree with that, Ann. There is no point in talking about the same topics. We need to see change, and I am sure that we all agree with you.

I will go back to the specifics of STEM subjects. Historically, their uptake among the female population has been considerably lower. What can be done at a policy level to increase that?

**Dr Harper:** There are already some really good initiatives. I mentioned Super Science Stars, which aims to engage people, including young women, in STEM subjects. Practically, how do we help young women and other young people understand STEM? As adults, we use STEM flippantly. We talk about it and understand it. For young people, however, particularly those with no family background in or awareness of STEM, it needs to be much more tangible, understandable and aspirational.

Linking it to our report, we see a role for careers advice being more innovative in that area. There is a huge issue with STEM. When we traditionally talk about STEM, we think about the higher qualification levels: the degree, the master's and the doctorate. There are, however, many STEM roles at level 2 and above. We cannot forget those young people. There is a temptation to reinforce a class divide, whereby those who are not on free school meals continue to be supported in following those careers. I use free school meals as a crude measure of economic capacity, but there needs to be more emphasis placed on STEM skills and roles that are not at degree level.

**Ms Brogan:** Those are important points, Ben. You are right that it comes back to a lack of careers advice.

Finally, I want to touch on an issue that you discussed in some detail with Robbie. Can there be specific interventions for children with additional needs, such as special educational needs, and looked-after children? You mentioned artificial intelligence and automation. Could those be routes for younger people with special educational needs to go down? Can you give me greater detail on your considerations about how schools can help those children?

**Dr Harper:** There are two issues. There are ways in which young people can be helped, but the other issue that we need to acknowledge is that many young people with special educational needs will be undiagnosed, owing to the significant complexities of and delays in the SEN system. You might wonder, given the available statistics, whether the young people with whom we spoke are the tip of the iceberg. Those who are not diagnosed and go down the SEN route will not be counted. The atypical learner with additional needs may be much more common than we think. It is a spectrum, from young people with dyspraxia or dyslexia right up to those with quite complex social, emotional and cognitive needs.

How do we involve them? The young people who are identified as being vulnerable and/or having additional needs receive much more targeted support. Again, work is done on mentoring in that regard. Young adults with additional needs who have been successful in obtaining employment or skills can be fantastic mentors to young people with additional needs. I have said before — I do not want to sound like a broken record — that young people need to see it to believe it. A young lady in Fleming Fulton School could be thinking, "What am I going to do with my life?". She could meet such a person who has been really successful or, if success is not measured through employment, is having a good life. If that person is able to reach out to other young people, that is an excellent first step. We highlight the role of mentors in the process.



**Ms Brogan:** That sounds fantastic, Ben. It is a really positive approach that shows exactly how successful they can be.

**Mr McNulty:** Thanks, Ben and Ann. Folks, what a wonderful presentation and evidence session. The line of questioning has been brilliant, and the information provided is fantastic.

You work for a think tank. Tell us the story of how you landed there through your education and career training. Did they expose you to the possibility of working for a think tank, or how did that happen?

**Dr Harper:** I did not prepare for this. I am proud of my personal experience. I came from a large working-class estate. I grew up in a high-rise. I did GCSEs in a school that did not do A levels, so I did my A levels in Belfast tech. I went on to do a degree. I worked with young people with mental health problems and was involved in multiple policy projects in Northern Ireland, before doing a doctorate in psychology. Since then, I have worked as a clinical lead in youth offending and in policy projects in the NHS. Just before I worked in the think tank, I worked in Queen's, in the Graduate School.

Think tanks offer people the opportunity to contribute their voice and evidence for change. That is certainly something that attracted me to work in a think tank. There is a paucity of critical evidence in Northern Ireland for change. We believe that we can really move that argument forward.

**Mr McNulty:** Brilliant. Ann?

**Ms Watt:** I had what might be seen as a more traditional, conventional route. I grew up in Belfast and then went to university in England to study economics. After that, I went into the Civil Service in London through the fast stream and spent 15 years working in different Departments. I worked in the Treasury for 10 years, in the Cabinet Office and in the Home Office. I then returned to Northern Ireland. I was the head of the Electoral Commission for five years. All of you on the Committee will have filled in Electoral Commission financial returns around election time. You probably hated us, to be honest. The opportunity then came up at Pivotal. I have always been really passionate about public policy. I have never been political at all, but I have a real passion for using evidence to improve policy, so the role at Pivotal was something that I really jumped at and thought would be a great opportunity to make a positive difference in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McNulty:** Thanks, Ann. I asked that for two reasons. First, I am genuinely interested in your journey. Secondly, there was no mention in careers class about becoming part of a think tank. I do not think that anybody in a careers class now is being asked, "How about becoming part of a think tank?". That is not an opportunity that is being presented to young people. That is why I am asking this: what is the best strategy for allowing children and young people to think outside the box about their potential future career, which may not exist right now? That sort of blue-sky thinking needs to be embedded in our education system to help children see that those possibilities may be there in the future.

Work experience and placements, which have been discussed already, are a huge part of that. How can we make it that work experience and placements happen not just in a one-week block as part of children's education but at different stages, in order to allow kids to get out and see what industry is doing, see what the possibilities are and broaden their minds?

**Dr Harper:** We think that there are some barriers to that. Many, if not all, employers that we met were really passionate about working with local schools and communities to encourage young people to work in their sector, or just to give them some sort of broad experience. Many employers told us that one of the barriers is that the timing of the curriculum is quite difficult to work around. Young people have academic requirements and classes to attend, and that creates a real blockage. Change to the way in which work experience is organised has also created some barriers. For example, the paperwork that small businesses have to complete is very off-putting and works counter to that will to involve young people.

Your point is a very important one. Criticality and what I would describe as meta thinking — thinking about thinking and thinking about processes — is done in some schools, but it is not done consistently. It is really interesting that so much emphasis is put on it for degree-level students, when if that work were done much earlier, there would be less need for it with them.

**Mr McNulty:** When I was in sixth form, my mates Paul McKevitt from Killeen and Ruairi O'Neill from the Dublin Road and I decided to do our work experience at Shorts aircraft factory in Belfast. What an

experience and what an education that was: for two reasons. On our last night, a bomb went off and blew Shaftesbury Square to bits. The IRA had let off a bomb. We went into Shorts the next morning, and they thought that the south Armagh boys had been to Belfast to do a job. That was an education.

What about soft skills and sports participation? I do not see sport mentioned in your report. Forgive me if I missed it. What is the importance and relevance of sport in enabling children to enhance their education, to broaden their education capacity and capabilities and to develop their soft skills? By soft skills, I am talking about problem-solving, innovation, teamwork, leadership, resilience, mental toughness and entrepreneurship. How is sport being utilised in our education system currently and how might it be utilised going forward?

**Dr Harper:** We did not look at sport as a stand-alone factor, but we did look at part-time employment, youth clubs and out-of-school activities. Young people consistently told us that, for example, football clubs, GAA clubs, hockey clubs, or whatever other sport young people are interested in, were very positive experiences for them. We found that they are particularly important for young people who do not feel connected to academic attainment, because they are able to feel good about themselves and be part of a team or an organisation. That is extremely important for overall well-being and a sense of self.

**Mr McNulty:** Ben, do you feel that, in education, the potential for sport to be used much more strategically as a learning tool for kids and young people has been properly explored?

**Dr Harper:** It certainly was not part of our project, but, from wider research, I know that sport has multiple benefits: psychological, physical and emotional. One possible issue in Northern Ireland is that sport can be quite binary, in that people engage in traditional sports. For young people who are not very sporty or do not have the ability to engage in quite complex team sports, it would be good to have a wider range of options and out-of-school or in-school activities.

**Ms Watt:** This is not in our report, but, seeing as you raised it, Justin, I will mention it, because it is really interesting. We have a focus here on achieving at a high level in sport rather than on participating. We encourage participation up until a certain age, perhaps 11 or 12. At that stage, there is less of an emphasis on winning, and it is all about taking part, teamwork, exercise, a healthy lifestyle and all of that, but sport then moves to being very much about achieving at a high level and being in a winning team. We have not done any work at all on this, but there is a real policy issue when it comes to how we encourage young people still to participate in sport for the wider benefits of a healthy lifestyle, teamworking, problem-solving and all those things. How do we encourage participation for those who are not attaining at the highest level?

**Mr McNulty:** I feel strongly about that. The fundamental fact is that if children and young people are having fun, they are winning. They all need to have access to and to participate regularly in a team environment, because it develops them so positively as people. That is a piece of research that your think tank could look into.

I want to touch on what Nicola and others have said already about the SEN aspect of education and how those children are encouraged and empowered to reach their full potential, whether that be academically, vocationally or through a blended style. It is incumbent on us as a society to provide those avenues of opportunity for children with special educational needs.

**Dr Harper:** I agree. Linked to the points that I made earlier, it is important. Many children with additional needs leave our education system undiagnosed, unsupported and on a pathway to a lot of insecurity. Based on the young people who are diagnosed, we know that outcomes are much poorer for those who do not have a diagnosis. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on how we move away from traditional careers and instead engage those young people in careers for the future.

We have found that special educational needs teachers are very busy. They are managing multiple systems and very complex young people and supporting their families. Arguably, they will require additional support to have that focus on careers, given the adaptations that some people with complex needs need for the labour market. Many social enterprises in Northern Ireland do excellent work with people with autism and learning disabilities. Hopefully, we will see a further growth in that and a focus on earlier intervention with young people to inspire them for the future.

**Mr McNulty:** Ben and Ann, thank you very much.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Last but not least, Harry has a question. Robin wants in after for a short question.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Ann and Dr Ben. There have been some excellent points made. It is great that helping people make important life choices is on the radar at the minute.

The report highlights the point that young people need to be willing to engage in training programmes if they are to be of any benefit to them. A gentle nudge in the right direction for some could be enough. What is your view on the concept of a compulsory work placement scheme for young people who have not been in education, employment or training for a long period? It could provide them with a wage and allow them to experience a workplace, thus giving them a stepping stone to building a CV. There were some good schemes in *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

**Dr Harper:** My initial thoughts are that any compulsory action can be quite difficult for young people psychologically and emotionally. It can raise people's defence barriers. I have extensive experience of working in youth offending, where young people were put on court orders to complete work experience and make reparation. In my experience, the young people who were mandated to do that often resisted the system.

I hear what you are saying, though, particularly if it is paid work. I am less sure about compulsory placements. It could be more about their being strongly encouraged or being embedded in the curriculum. There could be a wide range of options for young people to engage in. As we know, young people who are NEET are one of the most marginalised groups in society and will have poor outcomes. We have worked with really good initiatives such as the Prince's Trust, which is actively working with that population to improve health and education outcomes. From what I have learnt from my previous career and from this role, that needs to be done in a collaborative way, because some young people who are NEET have experienced extensive trauma, substance misuse issues etc. Having a compulsory element to it would make them kick back and not engage. It therefore could be counter-intuitive, but I hear what you are saying about offering a broader range of work placements and putting more emphasis on that. If they were paid placements, that could certainly be very encouraging.

**Mr Harvey:** The report also highlights the importance of careers departments in post-primary schools and the need for work experience for students. The level of careers support is often dependent on the individual school, while the time allocated for placements is limited. Is that something that the Department needs to address?

**Dr Harper:** That is something that we have raised with the project leads from the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy. We are on the same page about the need to develop more consistency. One idea is to have a central hub for work-experience options and enhanced careers advice. We are interested in the use of technology, so there could be some sort of online hub that young people can use to access bites of information. It could be a bit like an Instagram story — very short pieces of information that require a short attention span — to engage young people by moving beyond traditional one-to-one work, although that is still very important. We are hopeful that some of the recommendations that we have made will be considered in DE and DFE's larger transition project.

**Mr Harvey:** Excellent. Thank you very much for your answers.

**Mr Newton:** The executive summary of your second report states:

*"This report argues that transformational change is needed in the education and skills system for 14-19 year olds".*

There is general agreement across the Committee today that something needs to be done.

Harry referred to the NEET sector. Those who opt out of education aged 16 then take their advice from their local jobs and benefits office. That advice is probably about where a job is available rather than about a career. If we are to address the issue holistically, do we not need to see a joined-up approach between the Department of Education and local jobs and benefits offices so that professional advice can be offered to those who are seeking employment?

**Dr Harper:** I certainly see you point. In our first report, we talk about the need for joined-up thinking among the Department of Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and companies that are commissioned to do work on their behalf. In it, we highlight the point that there needs to be a wider understanding of young people who are NEET. The outcomes for employment placements for those young people are often quite poor, because they have not been connected to wider community help for various issues, be they mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues or basic issues such as housing. We cannot expect young people who are NEET to attend a work placement if they are sofa surfing or if their parent or the main adult in their life is using drugs and cannot really be there for them. There are therefore wide systemic issues in the NEET population that need to be addressed, but I agree that that goes beyond the Department of Education and into wider DWP issues.

**Mr Newton:** I am sure that this is not within your remit, but do you see a way of getting that joined-upness?

**Dr Harper:** Some of it is about trying to think about the whole-person approach. Initiatives have been done in Manchester and Liverpool in which the UK Department has worked with local charities, particularly those that help young people who are rough sleeping, to put together a package of support. They encourage thinking about housing and basic life skills before moving up the hierarchy of employment, because the expectation of getting into employment young people who have nowhere to live, have not enough to eat and have no consistency in their life is totally unrealistic. I have been really impressed by initiatives in the north-west of England that have done that sort of work, but doing it involves significant investment and cultural change.

**Mr Newton:** Thank you for that, Ben.

**Dr Harper:** I think that you are on mute, Chair.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Sorry, but I am having some technical issues. I want to ask one final question. *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* touched on is languages. In recent times, we have seen a decrease in the number of young people here who are learning modern languages. I am amazed when I go to the Continent and speak to young people who speak two, three and sometimes four languages. Dublin is full of young people who work for the likes of Google and Facebook and speak two, three or four languages fluently. Two people might go for a job, with all things being equal, except that one can speak three languages fluently. Is our economy and jobs market therefore not at a severe disadvantage unless languages are incorporated into any new approach?

**Dr Harper:** You broke up a bit there. If I have understood it, the summary of what you said is about the role of languages in promoting better economic outcomes or more job variation. Is that correct?

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** I am sorry. There appears to be a problem with my line. I will say it again.

I am amazed at the number of young people on the Continent who now speak two, three and sometimes four languages. Dublin is full of such young people, who work for companies such as Facebook and Google, yet here there has been a decrease in the number of young people learning languages. If two people go for a job and all things are equal except that one is fluent in two or three languages, will our young people not be at a disadvantage? Should languages not have a more important position in the time ahead, given the nature of the jobs market and the economy?

I hope that you were able to pick that up OK.

**Dr Harper:** I will pick up on the points that related to our research. Language study was not the focus of this study, but teachers talked about a busy, content-heavy curriculum. Some may say that the creation of more learning creates more difficulties for assessment.

There is the bigger issue of the importance of learning languages and what doing so does for young people's social, cognitive and emotional health. There is substantial evidence that learning languages creates better problem-solving skills in young people and enhances confidence, memory acquisition, creative capacity and flexibility in thought.

You mentioned the Continent. I cannot speak for all European countries, but, in many, the acquisition of multiple languages occurs in primary or nursery school. An increase in language study in Northern Ireland would require significant cultural change. While that may be useful and interesting, precursors may be required in the curriculum and its delivery before that occurs, if it can at all.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** Thanks for that, Ben.

Ann and Ben, I again thank you very much for your interesting and informative presentation and for your answers to questions. I am sure that you have given the Committee a lot of food for thought. We hope to speak to you again some time in the future.

**Dr Harper:** Thank you.

**Ms Watt:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for the invitation. We look forward to engaging with you again.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan):** You are welcome. Thank you.