



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

'A Fair Start' Report: Expert Panel on
Educational Underachievement; Department
of Education

6 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
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:

Ms Alison Chambers	Department of Education
Mr Dale Heaney	Department of Education
Ms Joyce Logue	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
Ms Mary Montgomery	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
Ms Kathleen O'Hare	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
Dr Noel Purdy	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement
Mr Jackie Redpath	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Dr Noel Purdy, director of the centre for research in educational underachievement at Stranmillis University College; Ms Joyce Logue, principal of Long Tower Primary School; Ms Mary Montgomery, principal of Belfast Boys' Model School; Kathleen O'Hare, retired principal of Hazelwood Integrated College and St Cecilia's College; and Jackie Redpath, chief executive of the Greater Shankill Partnership. I also welcome from the Department of Education Alison Chambers, director of promoting collaboration and tackling disadvantage; and Dale Heaney, head of the tackling educational disadvantage team.

I advise witnesses that the Committee will be glad to give you 10 minutes to make an opening statement, followed by questions from members, which can be answered from across the panel of witnesses. You are very welcome this morning. We are very grateful for the time that you are giving us, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Ms Alison Chambers (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to provide you with an update on the 'A Fair Start' report and action plan, which was endorsed by the Executive on 27 May and published by the panel on 1 June. You will note that Professor Feyisa Demie is not with us this morning, Chair. I am sure the Committee will want to ask

the panel about their experiences over the past year and how they found the process of evidence gathering, analysis and report writing.

The Department warmly welcomes the report, and I thank the expert panel members for the time, effort and consideration that they invested in compiling such a comprehensive and ambitious report and action plan.

Work has already commenced in the Department to deliver on the actions in the plan. A programme board has been set up comprising officials from a number of Departments, including Education, Health, Communities and Economy, along with representatives from the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). We have met three times so far, with further meetings scheduled for the rest of the year.

Senior responsible owners (SROs) have been established for each of the eight key areas identified in the report. A stakeholder reference group representing a wide range of interested stakeholders has also been established to support the programme board. That group will serve to discuss and refine the actions that will be taken forward.

Those governance and programme management arrangements are essential because we recognise that the 'A Fair Start' report is a long-term strategic approach to educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, and it will take time to plan and implement the very significant actions in it. Due to its cross-cutting nature, the matter goes much wider than the Department of Education alone, and for the Department to deliver on the report, there will be a need for significant financial commitment from the Executive not just for Education but for Health and other sectors, for example, in taking forward the early years work.

Having said that, the Minister is keen to see progress this year and has set aside £4 million from this year's budget to begin work on the actions. Two of the 47 actions have already been completed. The Minister wrote to all schools on 14 September asking them to complete the targeting social need (TSN) planner in order that effective practice in using this part of school budgets could be reported on and shared more widely. Key area 5 includes the development of a communications strategy to promote education, and that is focused on those who are most at risk of underachievement and designed in consultation with the community and young people. On 20 September 2021, we launched a new advertising campaign across all social media platforms entitled 'Try and Stop Me'. That campaign was developed in consultation with young people and parents from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. It is about instilling hope and aspiration in our young children.

Other work this year includes, under key area 1, the review of the Sure Start staffing structure; the independent review of targeted early years interventions such as Sure Start, the Pathway Fund and Toybox; enhancement of the suite of Getting Ready programmes to provide a continuum of active engagement with parents; early years assessment and support services for young children with developmental delay or special educational needs (SEN); progression of a system evaluation framework and sixth form policy and a look at alternative measures of deprivation; provision of digital devices to children who need that type of support; youth work in communities, beginning with youth work volunteers; building leadership capacity at all levels; and putting in place essential staff to deliver the action plan.

I hope that that gives you a sense of the significant work that is under way and the breadth of the work being done across all the organisations. We are happy to answer any questions the Committee may have at this time. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Sheehan: I commend the panel for the report and the work that it has done.

The links between educational underachievement and economic disadvantage are well known. According to some data that I saw recently, it is a fact that we have the highest rates of educational underachievement in the whole of Western Europe. I suppose that many reports, research and studies similar to this one have been produced, but implementation is important. My first question is: to what extent will the panel be involved in the implementation of the report and the action plan? Thank you.

Dr Noel Purdy (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement): Thanks very much for that question and for your approval of the action plan, which we worked on last year.

You are absolutely right. When the panel was appointed last July, there was fair criticism of the fact that here was another panel and another report being written on educational underachievement. We, as a panel, were determined, from the very outset that it would not simply be another report and another series of sweeping recommendations.

I believe that the report is different from previous reports. First, it has the authority of having been set up by a Minister and of being part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, and, as Alison said, it has already received endorsement from all five political parties that sit around the Executive table. Secondly, we were asked to write not just a series of recommendations but a costed action plan. That approach was very different from and much more challenging than that for previous reports, because writing costed actions and targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) is much harder than writing broad recommendations, but it makes the plan easier to implement. You are absolutely right, Pat. The key now is implementation. We, as a panel, are encouraged by what we have heard already this morning from Alison, a DE official. Our direct role in the future implementation may be limited, because our terms of reference were met and our work finished on 1 June 2021, but you can rest assured that we remain committed to the report. We have brought it this far, and we are determined to see, lobby and speak to folk like you on the Education Committee in order to ensure that cross-party endorsement is translated into cross-party support when it comes to financing the implementation.

Ms Chambers: I will add to that. Thematic area 8 includes a recommendation from the panel that we report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We plan to do the first report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in December 2021, followed by another report in June 2022, so twice-yearly reporting will be put in place.

Mr Sheehan: Alison, I heard you mention that the Minister has already set aside £4 million. What will that £4 million be used for?

Ms Chambers: It will be used for the range of work that I articulated at the end of the opening address, so it will be used for a review of Sure Start staffing; an independent review of targeted early years provision; enhancing the Getting Ready suite of programmes; early years assessment and support; progressing a system evaluation framework; looking at alternative measures of deprivation; the provision of digital devices; youth work in communities; building leadership capacity; and putting in place the staff necessary to deliver on the action plan. Dale, do you want to add to that?

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): For the purposes of Hansard, this is Dale Heaney speaking. We have already begun to think about some of the wider aspects of the action plan, including the reducing educational disadvantage programme, or RED programme. We have included Jackie, for example, on the stakeholder reference group to help us to develop the options on what that programme might look like in practice. We are very keen to bring that expertise from the panel and to make sure that we get the right voices around the table to ensure that we are developing it in the right way.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you for that. Noel mentioned that the panel produced a costed action plan. Alison already told us that £4 million has been set aside by the Minister. What will the overall cost of the plan be?

Dr Purdy: I think that it comes to around £180 million over 5 years. I was about to make the point that we welcome the fact that £4 million has been set aside over the next few months to implement some elements of the action plan, but a much more considerable investment by the Northern Ireland Executive is required. It is an issue not just for the Department of Education. We were clear from the very start about that, and we heard repeatedly throughout the process that educational underachievement and its underlying causes are cross-cutting, cross-departmental issues. It is an issue not just for the Department of Education but for the whole Executive, and we need all parties around the table to pledge a commitment to it. As you indicated, it will take much more than £4 million to deliver the recommendations and the costed actions that we have put forward.

Mr Sheehan: Finally — I know that we are very busy this morning — cross-departmental working has always been one of the big weaknesses of the Executive, as Ministers tend to operate in silos. Have you brought forward any recommendations that you think might help Ministers to break out of those silos and to work with other Departments on a common strategy on the way ahead?

Mr Heaney: I can answer that, Pat. The reducing educational disadvantage programme offers that opportunity. Again, the panel challenged us to think differently about how we go about tackling those community-driven issues, if you like. Rather than considering giving money to schools in the first instance, we could think differently about allocating funding to communities to design place-based approaches that are bespoke to specific locations where communities face particular challenges. Our plan is to talk to our colleagues in the Department for Communities, as well as those in the Executive Office, the Department of Justice and the Department for the Economy and so on. There is huge potential to use the RED programme as an exemplar of the cross-collaboration that we expect to be developed. That is just one example of the 47 actions where we think that huge progress can be made.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. I will finish by commending you all again on this very welcome piece of work. Thanks a lot.

Mr Newton: I welcome the departmental officials and the expert panel. It is certainly a very exciting piece of work. I think it is going to be a very good foundation for hopefully and finally making some progress on tackling underachievement, particularly among young Protestant boys. That was where the whole initiative came from.

I will follow on with the theme the Deputy Chair spoke about. Similar to him, I welcome the fact that £4 million has been set aside, pretty well immediately, by the Minister to make some progress. Presumably, the expert panel will remain in contact in some way with the programme board that has been set up. Maybe it is too early for this, and, if so, let me know, but have any long-term goals been set by the programme board? Are there any short-term goals on which we might make early gains that would be encouraging and would show the education sector as a whole and, indeed, the whole community how the process is working?

Ms Chambers: Thank you for those questions. We will keep in touch with the expert panel as a matter of course. We are in touch quite regularly with all the individuals around the table on one aspect or another of the plan. As Dale said, Jackie is on the stakeholder reference group as well and will be key in the development of the RED programme.

As for short-term goals, as a programme board, we have discussed the elements of the projects that we can take forward fairly quickly. As I said, we have already written to schools to encourage them to complete the targeting social need planner. We have launched a campaign on encouraging our young people to have aspirations and on instilling hope. Activities like that will continue. We are also looking at procuring additional digital devices where they are needed. We can put that in place fairly quickly. As for learning leaders, we are looking at the procurement of accredited training for our principals, and we will bring that forward fairly quickly.

You make a good point. We are in the early stages of developing the programme management structures around the expert panel report. The communications strategy will be key. We need to start branding the various projects that come forward under the banner of 'A Fair Start' so that the system starts to appreciate the investment that we are making in order to tackle underachievement under the auspices of the report. We will look at that in due course when we have the full programme management structures established. We have senior responsible owners assigned to each of the key thematic areas, and they will have their own project structures beneath those. The overarching programme board will manage all that. It will entail, in due course, the development of a communications strategy with all our educational stakeholders to talk about the positive benefits of the programme as we go forward.

Ms Kathleen O'Hare (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement): Robin, you voiced today one of the fears that I had when we finished the report and its action plan. The first fear was about money, and the second was about what would happen after that and whether we would have a monitoring role. It is a bit like your baby being four, letting them go to school and then not seeing them again. All of us were greatly involved in the report, and 500 others were also involved. We had Dale Heaney from the Department working with us. I felt that, once we finished the report, we may not be used again to either independently monitor the report or have an ongoing say, but I have to say that, to date, that has not been the case, even though there is no formal structure to do that. We will speak to other Committees as well.

If we are all serious about 'A Fair Start' and tackling underachievement in Northern Ireland, it is an issue not only for the Department of Education and this panel but for all parties and the party

manifestoes, because we know what is coming up next year. If we are all serious about every child in Northern Ireland getting a fair start, parties should put that in their manifestoes and start speaking about it. All of us in our own right will be speaking about it as part of the groups that we are in.

Mr Newton: That is good advice for the politicians, and I welcome it. I suspect that, for each panel member, there is a little bit of themselves in the report. It would be a great pity if the contact between panel members and the Department was lost.

Can I ask —?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robin, these will be your last 30 seconds or so for a final question or comment.

Mr Newton: That did not seem like seven minutes, mind you, but anyway.

Ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery is absolutely key for the plan. You made the point about how success will be measured in each of the paragraphs; how would we know if we had been successful? Maybe we need to get the Executive as a whole to buy in to the report, because unless that happens, the £180 million will not become available for mental health, community involvement, health issues generally and tackling levels of deprivation. If we do not get buy-in from the Executive as a whole, in many ways, the work will be devalued, and it is not a piece of work that should in any way be devalued.

Mr McCrossan: Hi, everyone. Thanks very much for that presentation.

This is really good, interesting and very important work. The SDLP has had a long interest in the matter. What you have shared with us today is positive and exciting, but I have concerns at the outset that, when you asked for £11 million for this year, you were awarded only £4 million. Is there any particular reason why that was the case?

Mr Heaney: It is simply a reflection of the timing of the report. Being published on 1 June, we had to estimate how much could be delivered within this financial year. It is a reasonable budget to work within given that the strategy was always intended to be long term. I felt that any advice that we could give to the Minister about judgement of budgets had to be measured. We had to be realistic about what could be done within the relatively short space of time of only a few months. We did not know what the figure would be until the final days of May and 1 June, so those estimates had to be provided quite early on.

Mr McCrossan: What about the £21 million that is needed for next year?

Mr Heaney: We are hopeful that we will secure the budget that is needed. Part of the challenge of doing anything in education is the difference between the financial and academic years. For example, if we are planning for something new and ambitious, such as the reducing educational disadvantage programme, we have to allow schools sufficient time to plan for it. It would not, for example, be full spend from 1 April. The earliest you might see a new programme like that would be September in any given year. Consequently, the impact on the budget will be significantly less.

We have to consider realistic targets by which new programmes in schools would be delivered. The £21 million is certainly ambitious, but that is something that we will need to discuss in more detail as part of the budget decisions and discussions to follow.

Mr McCrossan: There is a huge amount of work in this. If your estimate is that a further £21 million is needed for the 2022-23 year and the First Minister and deputy First Minister award only maybe half of that, what are the implications?

Ms Chambers: The implications for the programme are that we would not be able to deliver the full suite of actions. We would need to look at re-profiling. The action plan has been costed, as Dale outlined. If we do not secure all the necessary funding, we will look to re-profile and will keep pressing for the funding to be brought forward so that we can take the actions as far as possible. I will bring Noel in.

Dr Purdy: Thanks, Daniel. Your question is spot on. As a panel, we were, from the outset, very determined that aspects of the report would not be cherry-picked. It would be deeply regrettable if the Executive or, indeed, the Department of Education did not provide the funding next year or the year after.

Dale is right that a lot of the recommendations that we made for the immediate short term involve co-design and working with schools and community groups; a sort of bottom-up, place-based approach to addressing educational underachievement. That process of consultation and co-participation takes time, so there will be a lead-in period, and we appreciate that.

As I said, it would be deeply regrettable if the Executive did not move on the plan, because there is evidence to support our recommendations. We have made implementation as easy as possible by breaking the action plan up into six years with costs for every year. If it is not implemented, it will be a great shame.

Mr McCrossan: I agree very much. That is why I raised the question. Many great reports have been produced for various reasons over the years, and they have not been properly funded or resourced, so what is intended tends not to be the reality in the end.

I noticed that the earliest part of the presentation indicated that £180 million would be required. However, the timeline that I am reading here, which goes up to 2027 and beyond, states that a total of £73.1 million is required. Where is the other £106.9 million coming from?

Mr Heaney: It depends which years you count. The £180 million that Noel referred to was the estimate over the first five years. Of course, the estimates span a further year and beyond, so it depends which period of costs that you are talking about. I prefer to talk about what the annual cost is once the actions are fully established, and that is £73 million per annum. That is a more reliable figure to use.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have one minute, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Thank you. I have another point. Early intervention is a key component in tackling underachievement. I welcome the focus on it. You are clear that there needs to be collaboration between the Departments of Education and Health, which is important. At what level should there be collaboration? What should that collaboration look like? How should the effectiveness of that collaboration be measured and by whom?

Mr Jackie Redpath (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement): That is a critical question, which we mentioned earlier. The action plan will stand or fall by its monitoring and by it being agreed at the highest level. We made a specific recommendation at the end of the report:

"delivery should be subject to oversight by an Implementation Committee chaired by First Minister / deputy First Minister and meeting biannually, and that the Action Plan should be explicitly referenced within the next Programme for Government",

and, indeed, that there should be a budget attached to it. That is vital. No Department can do the work on its own. It requires collective action at every level in every Department, including at the highest level, and collective action on the ground between schools and all those involved in the different contexts in which children live their lives.

If we do not get all that collective action right, concentrated in the right places — a lot of the disadvantage is concentrated in particular towns and areas — and committed to in the long term, we will not get an outcome. The project needs an implementation plan that is then monitored by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is the action that we recommend.

Mr McCrossan: Right, Jackie. That is critical. Thank you. That was very powerful. I put firmly on record my sincerest appreciation to you all. I have been following your work from the outset, and it is hugely positive. It is transformational. I know that a huge amount of work, effort and energy have gone into it. I appreciate the engagement that you have had with us and others. Thanks very much, folks.

Mr Butler: Thank you, guys. It is good to be here with you on an exciting piece of work. Thank you for the effort that you have put into the report, and I hope that we can work collegiately with you to bring it to fruition.

All of the report will need to be actioned to see the success that we all crave. However, is the chronological order in which you have put things in the report an indication of the importance that you place on each issue? For instance, I see that the section on early years and early intervention is at the start. It is very well written, and there is a lot in it that I do not think that any of us would disagree with. Is that an unfair assumption to make at this stage?

Ms Joyce Logue (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement): Robbie, the panel was in no doubt, from all the stakeholders we engaged with, that early years was crucial. It became clear very soon that we needed to put a greater emphasis on early years, so we talk about redirecting the focus. Money put in to early intervention will have a great impact not only on physical and mental health and well-being but on educational attainment and employment prospects. That saves money down the line; it is a no-brainer.

The report had cross-party and cross-community support. We were overwhelmed by the number of people who engaged with us who really believe that it needs to be implemented. I go back to what Kathleen said about us heading into an election next year. This has to be at the top of the agenda, because, if we do not get it right at early years, it will be so much more costly further down the line. Have we made this a focus? Yes, early years certainly comes first.

Mr Butler: I was pleased to read, at the start of the report, about the links with pregnancy, birth and that type of stuff. Examples of the need for interdepartmental working and so on are littered throughout.

There is disparity in access to early years support, while the number of part-time and full-time nursery places is an issue. That hints at the need to redress the imbalance. Does the report go so far as to recommend that every child should have full-time nursery provision, or, for example, a minimum of 30 hours, as is the case in the rest of the UK, as a component part of addressing that?

Ms Logue: We certainly recommend that every child have nursery provision. On a 30-hour minimum, we believe that every child should have from 9.00 am to 1.30 pm daily provision because that includes a meal in school. That is crucial, particularly in our most underprivileged areas. We heard at the beginning about the effect of sleep deprivation. Food deprivation is just as important, so children having a meal in a school is crucial, particularly in our deprived areas.

Mr Butler: I totally agree. I would love to see all our children eat at least one good meal a day together, regardless of where they come from. Socially, that would be a good thing to do.

I see that you have referred to work that has been done on emotional health and well-being. Did you engage with any youth groups or young people's advocacy groups to draw on their experience?

Dr Purdy: As part of the process during the year, there was engagement with children and young people. Children were engaged with by means of work commissioned from the National Children's Bureau (NCB), and Barnardo's did some work with 11- to 21-year-olds in disadvantaged communities. A number of issues came through in that engagement, particularly with the 11- to 21-year-olds. Emotional health and well-being was one of the strongest themes to emerge from that engagement process. There were young people who felt stressed by the pressure of school exams and assessment and so on. That was irrespective of COVID, but there was also an appreciation of teachers and schools who went the extra mile, built up positive relationships, taught effectively and showed an interest in, and respect for, the children and young people.

There were a lot of positives from that engagement with the children and young people. There were a lot of things that do not just relate to emotional health and well-being but to curriculum, assessment and many of the other areas that we covered in our report.

Kathleen wants to come in.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have two minutes, Robbie.

Ms O'Hare: I attended some of those groups, and the children involved were between nine and 12 years. At that stage, they were very much focused on the fact that they had no place for homework; they also focused on the digital divide. It was obvious, with one of the groups that I attended, that they had a real difficulty with engaging in education, particularly during the pandemic.

Joyce, Mary and Jackie will see this every day, as they serve communities that are really in need and are underachieving because they have social deprivation indicators present.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that. This is my final question because I have only one minute left. There is a really interesting piece about the narrowness of looking at GCSE and A-level attainment. That is good to see. Could someone flesh that out to talk about what ongoing assessment and portability might look like? Have you any ideas or blue-sky thinking about how we measure success while ensuring that we tackle the underlying issue of educational underachievement?

Ms O'Hare: Robbie, I will declare an interest and then hand over to Jackie. I am a council member in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). I would not downgrade GCSEs and A levels, but the pandemic has given us a great opportunity to experiment and look at other forms of assessment. The Northern Ireland Assembly should encourage, and fund, groups such as CCEA to look at other ways of assessing children. It is a disgrace that the first formal assessment of our children is at the age of 16. How are we going to look at how they are falling behind, or put in place interventions, if we do not put on a public exam until children are 16? I do not mean an examination that punishes young people for not knowing; I mean one that looks at where children fall behind and puts interventions in place to make sure that that does not happen.

It was a disgrace to see that, in some Sure Start areas, children were coming to Sure Start at two or three years of age with only two words. That was completely shocking for the panel to see.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are out of time, Robbie, sorry. If we are on time, and there is time for supplementary questions, I will do my best. I have already given you flexibility.

Mrs Dodds: Good morning, everyone. Thank you to the panel for a very strong report. I want to focus on a couple of things. We have had a really good run through the funding and the need to secure it, and interdepartmental working to bring the report together, but a couple of things in the report really interest me.

How do you see children with special educational needs, and their particular disadvantage, fitting into the overall picture? Can we do more things to support those children?

I will throw this all out at once so that anyone can respond to me, but I have a question particularly for Jackie. In areas of educational disadvantage, do you see the RED programme being set up a bit like the greater Shankill children and young people zone and the integrated services model? If you were doing that, and giving advice to the Department, how would you choose those? What metrics would you choose those zones on? Sometimes when we identify areas of deep disadvantage and deprivation, we leave out pockets in affluent areas where there is equal deprivation. I am really interested in that.

I would like to come back to the curriculum issues later. It is a great report, and the foundational work on early years is very important.

Dr Purdy: Thank you, Diane. I will start on special educational needs and then pass to Jackie to talk about the RED programme.

We engaged on special education needs with quite a number of parents and through the survey, and special educational needs emerged as a major concern, particularly in relation to the timeliness of identification, assessment and intervention on the part of schools and especially by the Education Authority, the psychology service and so on, which we appreciate are very overstretched.

We mentioned our actions. We have spoken already about the importance of early years, and, in key area 1, "Redirecting the focus to Early Years", we costed the expansion of the early years SEN inclusion service because we appreciate that the needs of young children are often not identified early enough. So, even from nought to three, and in the preschool year, an expansion of the identification and assessment service being provided by the Education Authority is there.

On pages 43 and 44, we refer to a number of recent reports that the Committee will be familiar with. There is the Audit Office review of special educational needs and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's (NICCY's) 'Too Little, Too Late' reports that came out about a year ago. All were very critical of the SEN system in Northern Ireland and asked for major overhauls.

As a panel, we spoke to the Education Authority about it and are aware that a number of changes and major reviews are afoot. You will have heard about that from senior officials in the Education Authority as well. Our actions focused on the early years in relation to SEN, but we were calling very strongly for more timely interventions and for the review of the Education Authority special educational needs services to be accelerated so that children's needs can be met as quickly as possible.

I will pass to Jackie for the second half of your question.

Mr Redpath: Thanks for that, Diane. Yes, this is a critical issue. There are parts of Northern Ireland where there is the greatest concentration of educational underachievement, and they can be thrown up by interrogating the education domain in the domains of disadvantage. The worst and most difficult 10% in those domains will show where the places are and where the concentrations are. The theory here in needing a place-based approach is that it will cohere the greatest concentration of effort in those localities with the greatest concentration of educational underachievement. It will be a great challenge to identify those areas, but alongside it is your point that there is also educational disadvantage that is spatially spread throughout Northern Ireland, for example in rural areas, where it will be much more *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* also need to be. So, there needs to be a concentrated effort.

I had a mantra from a figure that we were given by the Department of Education when we had our first or second meeting as a panel. It is that children between the ages of four and 18 spend only 13% of their waking hours in a school environment. So, 87% of a child's waking hours is spent in other environments outside school. Obviously, schools are critical and crucial, but we also need to take account of all the contexts in which children live their lives if we are to bring about transformational change in all, not just some, aspects. It takes a coherent effort across all contexts, in particular the places where children live their lives.

Children do not live their lives in a box that is called the Department of Education or the Department of Health or whatever. They live their lives in families, in youth clubs and on the streets, and we need to get all that right and bring it together. On the Shankill, we have declared a children and young people zone, and part of the theory behind that is to bring together all the efforts in the different contexts.

The RED programme is subject to design at the moment, so I cannot comment on exactly how it will take place and how it will roll out, but we are looking forward to it.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. I have another issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Diane, please be as concise as possible. Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: It is about maximising boys' potential. If I read the report right, you say that, in the past three years, Protestant boys consistently underperformed but that the real issue of disadvantage is between those who are on free school meals and those who are not, where the attainment gap is ever greater. Therefore, social and economic disadvantage plays into that. Does anyone want to comment on that? It is massively important.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Diane. Please keep your response concise, guys. I have a few more MLAs to get through.

Ms Mary Montgomery (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement): Not a problem. Diane, I will take your question. The figures really are stark. When you factor in free school meals and special educational needs, the performance of Protestant boys in Northern Ireland is nothing short of shocking. We have thought long and hard about the strategies that we feel would work with maximum impact, and they are contained in the report. We feel that what is suggested would go a long way to redressing that.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. That is really important.

Ms Montgomery: That is as short as I can make it, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a really good question, Diane, as has been the case from everybody. We could be here all day, and members might want to consider some additional engagement with the panel outside the time confines of our formal meeting.

To supplement that, and I recognise that there cannot be a brief answer, are there three key reasons why that shocking reality exists?

Ms Montgomery: First, boys are unique, no matter what their social demographic. Boys are primarily relational learners, and they thrive in an environment where they are nurtured, valued and respected. When you add in the other factors that contribute to disadvantage, such as special needs or free school meals entitlement (FSME), those things set boys at a significant disadvantage because they do not have the natural social infrastructure in their communities, in their families or among their peers to engage effectively with education, so the first reason is the male brain and the way in which the male brain learns. The second challenge that we face with Protestant boys is that, to a large extent, when they come from a community where there is social disadvantage and where there are issues, those communities, to some extent, feel under siege.

Ms O'Hare: Culturally.

Ms Montgomery: Culturally, those boys can feel that they are on the back foot in society. There is a high profile at the moment of feeling that their voices are not being heard or not being listened to. There is a microcosm of that in schools. They need to feel listened to; they need to feel that they have a voice. However, they also need respect: to be treated respectfully, and they need an education system that engages with them respectfully.

Mr Redpath: Chair, can I add something very quickly?

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

Mr Redpath: It is an important and delicate issue. Underachievement is related to poverty, and you will find it in areas with the greatest deprivation, whatever the profile or religion of the children. However, there are different experiences in life, and, on top of what Mary said, which is absolutely spot on, we have looked at the causes of this on the Shankill.

I was part of the last generation on the Shankill — my age group — that did not need a single qualification to their name to make their way in life. We were spoken for in the old heavy industries, and we did not need education or a qualification to make our way. That has utterly changed in the last two to three generations. Therefore, very often in hardcore Protestant working-class areas, you do not have a tradition of valuing education. I say that as someone from one of those areas and a community member. We do not have a tradition of valuing education as we should because we did not need to do that historically. There is a lot to be made up there. I say that with as much delicacy as I can, being aware of all the things that are around it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Jackie, I am from a pretty similar background. The other day, I was referred to — I think disparagingly; I am not entirely clear — as an "educated person". That gives you some insight into the work that needs to be done to make that a valued term rather than a disparaging one. It would be interesting and constructive to get into what we can do to assist transformation and inclusion in that regard, but I do not have time this morning. Sorry. Thanks for that —.

Ms O'Hare: Can I just add a "hear, hear" to that? I went from being a principal in a school off the Bogside in Derry to being a principal in north Belfast, and I immediately found that cultural shift. There needs to be a huge catch-up in our thinking.

As Jackie found, people may not have been given a job or spoken for, but that culture still existed. It was similar in Derry after the shirt factories closed. At one stage, girls thought that they needed only a first-level education to go into the shirt factories. The shirt factories closed, but the culture of the organisation did not catch up. That is exactly what is there in north Belfast. The remedy needs to be there to sort the children that Jackie and Mary serve.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Obviously, a huge amount of amazing work is going on in that regard, for example, through EastSide Learning. We have work to do, but we are setting our course well.

Ms Brogan: Everyone, thanks for your presentation. It is a fantastic report, and the Committee is committed to addressing educational underachievement. Thanks for bringing it before us.

I will focus on an area that has been touched on quite heavily: early years. I am glad that so much focus was put on it throughout the report. It goes without saying that additional support and resources in that area will help children and their development, but it will also have a big impact and positive effect on the workforce. Sometimes, early years staff feel as if they are overlooked, but that will make them feel valued and respected. It is good that so much focus has been put on early years.

In the report, you outline 13 actions. Which of those actions do you deem to be the most important? Will you outline a time frame for the implementation of those actions, please?

Ms Logue: I will very quickly answer your question about what we deem to be the most important action: we deem every one of them to be important. We looked at all the actions carefully and cut them down to 13. We could not cut them down any more. Every one of them carries equal weighting.

Going back to your question about the workforce, without a professionally developed workforce, we cannot improve the stakes for our children. One of our 13 actions is:

"to develop an adequately resourced and supported training, qualifications and CPD strategy for the Early Years workforce, with consideration given to graduate-led provision."

We added "graduate-led provision" because graduates lead and work with our children at every other stage of education, but not in early years. We feel that it is crucial that we look at having that across the board.

A professional, qualified workforce is, of course, essential to implementing all 13 of the actions. We cannot do that alone; it will call in a lot of work from Health and Communities.

Ms Brogan: Thanks for that. I completely agree: it would instil confidence in the workforce. That is a really positive thing.

I do not want to focus too much on the actions, but I will highlight two. It is back to the points that Noel raised earlier. Point xi is to:

"develop, enhance, invest in and commission Early Years assessment ... for younger children with developmental delay",

and xii is to:

"enhance support at pre-school to support children with SEN".

Last week, the Committee heard from Pam Cameron, who has brought the Autism (Amendment) Bill to the Assembly. One of the big issues with autism in particular has already been mentioned this morning: the delay in assessment and diagnosis. That is pertinent to early years services as well. Noel mentioned drawing on the resources of the Education Authority and making sure that it knows what its role is. Have you had any discussions with the Department of Health or have you made any recommendations to it specifically about how to address the delays in assessment and the early intervention and the support for the young child, families and carers?

Dr Purdy: Thanks, Nicola. It is a huge area, as you know. As I said, a number of reports have flagged it up in recent years. I think that everybody accepts that the current system is creaking under pressure. Unfortunately, the needs of too many children are unidentified until far too late into their educational journey. We have, as you suggested, prioritised recommendations xi and xii so that children as young as possible — in the nought-to-three stage in the preschool year — can have their needs assessed, identified and met rather than waiting until they are seven, eight or nine in primary school, where there is a quota on the number of psychology assessments imposed on the school and schools have to make very challenging decisions about who will go forward for an assessment this year and who will have to wait until next year. We, as a panel, find that unacceptable, as, I think, does everyone else.

We welcome early intervention, early assessment and supporting children and their families as early as possible.

Ms Brogan: Have you made any specific recommendations to the Department of Health? Cross-departmental working is talked about throughout the report, which, obviously, is so important — we need everyone on board — but have you had discussions with or made recommendations to that Department?

Dr Purdy: We spoke to the Department of Health and its officials when drafting the actions, so they were on board in those discussions. We have added the Department of Health to action xi, which is the nought-to-three stage. The Department of Education, the Education Authority, and the Department of Health will take responsibility for its implementation.

I will pass to Alison to speak about implementation.

Ms Chambers: The Department of Health is represented in the programme management structures and will be represented in the individual projects. The table highlights that actions xi, xii and xiii are medium- to longer-term objectives, so they will take a bit of planning and design before they are brought forward. They will not be in the immediate first or second year.

Ms Brogan: The final point was about the Department of Health. One of the major issues in autism assessment is the disparity between trusts. That was why I was making that point.

Thanks so much for all the information. It is a really good report, and we appreciate your taking time this morning to explain it to us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have two quick supplementaries. I think that Jackie cited the recommendation that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should chair an implementation group. Can a Department of Education representative update us as to whether that will be the case?

Ms Chambers: Yes. We have written to the permanent secretary in TEO, and we have a meeting imminently with him to discuss the arrangements for that. We have made a commitment to reporting in December and June. Once we have those discussions with the permanent secretary, we will update you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Will you propose to TEO that that recommendation be implemented?

Ms Chambers: Yes. That is why the discussion has been set up.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Would an annual Assembly report on progress on implementation of the recommendations be actionable?

Ms Chambers: We intend to report twice a year, and we can make the June report available to anyone who wants to see it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You say "report". What format will that take?

Ms Chambers: We will need to work out with the Executive Office in what format the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would like it. It will probably be along the lines of the programme board reporting, where we have each individual project articulated with costs and progress. As each business case is established, we will eventually look at having some kind of outcomes-based accountability reporting mechanism for each of the projects.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will propose to my Committee colleagues that we recommend that those twice-yearly reports be presented to the Assembly in some sort of ministerial statement or take-note debate. That would be constructive.

Thanks for that. I will bring in Justin McNulty.

Mr McNulty: *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, you are on mute.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, Chair. Good morning, folks. Well done on this unbelievably important and exciting piece of work, which will be a game changer for so many kids if it is implemented as proposed. On the early years workforce, you call for:

"adequate training, relevant qualifications and an appropriate pay structure."

The report then refers to the "complexity of Early Years provision". What do you mean by that?

Ms Logue: There is disparity in early years provision. It is not the same across the board. In nurseries that are attached to schools, you will have a graduate-led nursery. In nurseries that are outside of that, you will not have that. Training is also hit-and-miss across the board. We feel that it is very important that there is a workforce that is uniformly educated across all nurseries, playgroups and nursery schools and that professional development is the same across the board. If that is the case, it will have an impact on children, and they will get the very best. As Kathleen said, we have two-year-olds coming into Sure Start with two words. As a practitioner, I see that there is such need at early years. We have to get it right, and we are not getting it right at the minute. Professional development, valuing our workforce and all of that will go a long way to improving our early years provision. Working with Health —.

Mr McNulty: *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Logue: Sorry?

Mr McNulty: Do we have the capacity to provide the relevant training and qualifications?

Ms Logue: Say that again. Sorry.

Mr McNulty: Do we have the capacity to provide the relevant training and qualifications in order to create the uniformity that you spoke about?

Ms Logue: We have, but it will require working with training colleges. It will also require commitment and money.

Dr Purdy: Justin, that is an important question. For many years, there have been disparities between statutory and non-statutory provision in early years. That is well known. It extends to professional development, rates of pay and qualifications. It is unfair, and addressing it is a hugely complex task. It cannot be achieved overnight. We are aware of the complexities of trying to do that. Addressing it, looking at it and strategising around it is the first step in moving forward. As I said, it is not something that can be solved overnight, but, as Joyce said, we owe it to children that, whatever setting they are in between the ages of nought and four, they receive parity of provision from equally educated workers. Moreover, for workforce esteem, workers in non-statutory playgroups and so on should receive the kind of training, support and remuneration that they deserve for the important work that they do.

Mr McNulty: Early years is a very important influence. My son has started his early years experience with Sure Start in Newry. It is a lifeline for my wife, and it is a wonderful experience for my son, two or three days a week. I commend the people who work in early years. They should be supported and remunerated appropriately.

Joyce, according to the report, the Heckman curve confirms:

"Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills".

Will you give me more information on that so that I can understand it further?

Ms Logue: To put it simply, the more that we invest earlier, the better the outcomes. It is as simple as that. If we put the money in early, we save the economy later. Furthermore, we are making children feel valued, and we are giving hope. If you put the money in early, you close the gap early. It is a no-brainer.

Mr McNulty: What does "skills beget skills" mean?

Ms Logue: If we teach our children skills — something as simple as communication skills — from a very young age, those skills will be built on as they go through the years. The gap will not increase as the youngsters go on. Rather, the underachievement gap will narrow. If children get the input early, it will pay dividends on down the road. Ideally, there will not be a skills gap.

Ms O'Hare: Justin, I am happy that your child got into Sure Start in Newry, but if you live in a country area — Ballyholland or wherever else — children get into Sure Start by chance. One hundred per cent of our children should have access to early years. If children are behind when they are two, they will be particularly behind when they are 10, and then really behind by the time that they come to Mary or me at post-primary school. Early intervention could fix that a lot earlier, and doing it would, in fact, be saving money.

Mr McNulty: That makes sense. I am fired up by you folks' passion and knowledge.

I will move on to the key area that deals with championing emotional health and well-being, as well as that on the whole-community approach to education. Indeed, Jackie, you spoke at length about the latter. Why is there no mention of sport in the report? Why is there no mention of physical education and the really important role that it can play in developing children's educational ability and their capacity to learn, as well as its benefits for their emotional health and well-being?

Ms Montgomery: We talk about "enrichment". It goes back to your other point about "skills beget skills". Children who come from social disadvantage come to us with a skills deficit. The skills developed in playing tennis, for example, beget more skills than simply the ability to hit a ball with a racquet. There is team work, communication, self-confidence and self-esteem: a multitude of skills. Many of you will know about the skills agenda in the economy and about how skills are much more important than qualifications, almost, to young people in the current climate. We therefore recognise skills. We also, however, recognise a social capital deficit. There is reference in the report to the need for "enrichment and extra-curricular activities". In the community that we serve, we find that children do not naturally have that exposure to sport or extra-curricular activities, such as debating, leadership opportunities, mentoring and volunteering, or even part-time work. That is a shortfall that we have got to address for the children who are coming to us from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Your two questions are therefore connected, I suppose.

Mr McNulty: Nicola talked about special educational —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are almost out of time, Justin. Will you make this your last question?

Mr McNulty: — needs, autism and dyslexia. How are they identified as part of the report? Some children go through their school experience without having their dyslexia identified. That brings trauma, and, as a result, their education is in the bin. How have the challenges around autism and dyslexia been addressed in the report?

Dr Purdy: Thanks, Justin. As we said earlier, early interventions and assessments in the nought-to-three and three-to-four early years stages are crucial for meeting the needs of children with special educational needs, irrespective of what those needs are. I appreciate that there are particular concerns around children with autism, reading difficulties or dyslexia, but there are many other forms of special educational needs. I would not want to focus exclusively on autism or dyslexia, and you can appreciate the reasons for that.

We have also heard from and spoken to officials at the Education Authority. We are aware that there are changes in train there. We have called for those changes to be accelerated, and for real change to happen for children throughout the education system. As we have said repeatedly, early intervention, early identification and fulfilling the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Impact Review of Special Educational Needs' and the NICCY 'Too Little, Too Late' report are well-known changes that can be made. We understand that the Education Authority and the Department of Education officials are already working on those. We are fully supportive of the calls in those reports for services to be improved. In our report, we have called for that to happen as soon as possible.

Mr McNulty: Thank you for your evidence. It is a brilliant report. We will take responsibility now for ensuring that it does not just sit on a shelf.

Mr Harvey: I thank the panel, one and all. Over the past year, COVID has brought us all complications. Have your findings been hampered by the restrictions, or were you able to adapt? Effective engagement with parents is critical. Are you confident that you were able to get the required information?

Ms Montgomery: We set off with great intentions of conducting our research in person, and we had various satellite sessions planned. We quickly shifted to a hybrid model, however. We met some people in person and continued most of our work in this convenient online format, and that allowed us to contact parents and students just as easily. In fact, the online version of our sessions was perhaps more comfortable for parents, as they were quite happy to converse with us.

Did COVID in any way hamper or change those sessions? COVID shone a light brightly on our findings. We already knew about the impact of social disadvantage on communities that experience it, but we discovered that the impact was multiplied by COVID. In every case, those at a disadvantage were further disadvantaged by the experience of COVID. We caught the tail end of your comments about sleep. Young people in disadvantaged areas had absolutely no routine. Their sleeping and eating patterns were upside down, and the home-learning environment was not conducive to productive online learning during the school day. There were also issues to do with nutrition and a lack of access to free school meals. All those issues were writ large during our work.

Mr Harvey: Excellent answer. Another concern is that sometimes those in the most need are missed and the hardest to reach. We do not want anyone to slip through the net. What attention are you paying to that?

Mr Redpath: Harry, that is one of the reasons that we recommended a place-based approach. We need to go to where the problem and the need is, and do so in a concentrated way. A challenge beyond that will be where the need is spatially spread, particularly in rural areas, where it will not be such a place-based approach taken. Both therefore need to be picked up on. Where the places with the greatest concentration of need are can be identified from the data in the education domain of underachievement. The RED programme will look at identifying need and at how we can organise in those places all those with anything to do with children's lives in a collective, concentrated and long-term effort. That will be a massive challenge, because the infrastructure — not least the community youth infrastructure — is very often at its weakest in those areas. This is not an easy road. It is a long haul, and we are very aware of that.

Ms O'Hare: I will add to that, Jackie. The place of Health is so important, Harry. The teacher does not see the child until it is in its early years setting, but the community midwife does. That is why cross-phase links are required. Jackie reinforced the fact that this report begins when the baby is a bump. It should begin then in order to let the mother know about developmental stages. In fact, it should also begin in school, with young people knowing about the development of a child. Health is of key importance before the child gets to school.

Mr Harvey: In effect, that is what this panel is really good for, and that is why it should be well supported.

To finish, has the expert panel been reassured by the Department that 'A Fair Start' and its implementation remain a commitment for the Minister?

Dr Purdy: Thanks, Harry. That goes back to where we started. It is our key priority. That is the big question that we are also asking. We have met the Minister and been assured of her support for 'A Fair Start'. We are very encouraged by that. There is a new Minister since Peter Weir's time, which is when the report was commissioned and launched, but we are encouraged by the ministerial support.

As we said at the start, and have done throughout, this is not just about the Department of Education or even the MLAs who are on the screen today. This is an Executive responsibility, and we urge all the political parties to get behind 'A Fair Start' so that it is in their manifestoes and is in the Programme for Government, and so that the actions that are being implemented at the minute are branded as being part of 'A Fair Start', thus making people aware that the report is making a difference on the ground.

We are cautiously optimistic about having the Minister's support, but, to turn our report into a reality, Executive support is required on top of that.

Mr Harvey: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have a couple of questions. The 'A Fair Start' expert panel report found:

"evidence ... that academic selection skews teaching at Key Stage 2 (prioritising literacy and numeracy at the expense of other Areas of Learning)",

significantly lower post-primary transfer outcomes for free school meal entitlement pupils than for non-FSME pupils and:

"significantly lower percentages of FSME pupils attending grammar schools."

Your report also cites the OECD's 'Northern Ireland, United Kingdom — OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education' from 2012, which:

"criticised our system of transfer testing as socially divisive and warned of the social imbalance"

that it engineers:

"as some parents and families are better able to support and prepare their children for these tests"

than others.

'A Fair Start' concludes that "addressing this systemic inequality" of academic selection "should be a priority" for the Department of Education.

Given the veracity of those findings and the identification of "systemic inequality", why does the 'A Fair Start' expert panel report make no recommendations for action on the use of academic criteria for post-primary transfer?

Dr Purdy: Thanks, Chair. I refer to pages 20 and 21, from which you cited. If you go to the sentence before the first one that you read out, you will read:

"although there were some very clear voices in opposition to selection at 11, it dominated neither the on-line consultation nor the oral evidence sessions."

We met you and many other MLAs, and, yes, that was an issue, but it certainly did not dominate. To be honest, it did not dominate as much as we expected it to dominate. That is not to play it down, however. You read out from the paragraph in which we go on to welcome the fact that that is very clearly in the independent review panel's terms of reference. That panel was announced last week, and we look forward to its consideration in detail of that particular issue.

One could not look at the data without identifying some of the inequalities that exist, and we did identify them. They are well-documented. We stopped short of writing the issue of academic selection into our action plan, mainly because the independent review panel will very explicitly be looking at it. We are very happy to speak to the team and to tell it what we found, but that matter is very clearly part of its terms of reference. We look forward to its deliberations on that very contentious issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am not particularly reassured by that. The report refers to skewed teaching, significantly lower outcomes for FSME pupils and systemic inequality. Do you want to go further in explaining why there was no recommendation?

Ms O'Hare: Chris, taking the word "selection" out of it, we make recommendations on curriculum and assessment. We look at assessment earlier in Key Stages 1 and 2. For us, the selection is not a government-approved test but a selection mechanism.

You will not get anybody as opposed to selection at age 11 as me. I taught in the non-selective sector for 35 years, and I saw the damage that it had done to children coming to school in year 8 and how we

had to build them back up again. We recommend assessment in early years at Key Stages 1 and 2, but it is assessment for learning. I know that that is perhaps an antiquated notion, and one that needs to be rehearsed, but I think that it needs to happen.

It was not part of our terms of reference, but it is part of the independent review panel's terms of reference. We are always aware that it is an elephant in the room in Northern Ireland, and Governments have constantly tried to get rid of it. Allow me to pass that back to you as elected representatives, because it was a recommendation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and, in fact, of a previous Education Minister, for that to happen. It is in government recommendations, and the issue has just not moved in government.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will ask a genuine supplementary question. I appreciate the answers so far. I do not think that our views are going to meet on why there is no recommendation. Let us therefore step back from that. This is a genuinely open question. By asking such questions, I will get accused of being on a crusade or whatever else, despite the evidential basis for them. In the weighting of the top 10 barriers to equal educational opportunity, putting aside whether you made a recommendation on academic selection, how significant a barrier to, and an inhibitor of, equal educational opportunity do you regard the current approach to post-primary transfer to be, given that you referred to it as a "systemic inequality"? Will you give me some idea of where its significance sits?

Ms Montgomery: In any consideration of that decision, I will draw your attention to the size of the attainment gap before children get to post-primary education. The evidence that we considered showed that those gaps exist from age two or three. We are hugely at a disadvantage, because of the need for a revised assessment system in primary schools, but those gaps exist way before a child gets to age 11. In fact, it is almost too late. The heavy lifting that a post-primary school is required to do in order to add any value to that child's education experience is really difficult. It is a huge piece of work to lift children at age 11 and subsequently send them out with five GCSEs, including English and maths. That takes us full circle back to Joyce's point. Early years provision needs massive investment, because that gap at age two or three grows and grows.

Mr Redpath: Chris, I will come in here. Kathleen mentioned seeing a lot of year 8 pupils come into post-primary school damaged by selection. I am well past year 8 and continue to carry damage from the 11-plus, so my heart is totally with you on what you are talking about, but, to be quite explicit, it was not in our terms of reference. It is in the terms of a reference of another panel that has just been appointed. We held to our terms of reference. In fact, what you quoted to us was us going slightly beyond our terms of reference. Mary's point is critical: there is no silver bullet at 11 either way, and addressing this at 11 will be far too late.

Let me make a political point and then a tactical point. It would be wrong to put on this panel a responsibility to deal with an issue that has not been dealt with, in whatever shape or form, by our elected representatives. We had neither the authority nor the terms of reference to deal with it. That is a fairly basic point. We considered it and knew that it was an issue.

Finally and quickly, my tactical point is that there are previous reports about educational underachievement that included the 11-plus or selection, and they are gathering dust as a result. We did not want this report to gather dust, and we particularly did not want the focus on getting in early and on early years to be ignored because it got overwhelmed by another issue. That is the truth of the matter.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you for those responses. To conclude, given the weight of the contribution that you have made on the issue — you referred to Assembly motions and previous reports — I find it just plain wrong that there is not a collective attempt to respond to that particular issue. If "systemic inequality" is not a clarion call for people to act, that is unacceptable.

You make a good and useful final point, Jackie. It is probably important for us to acknowledge the work done previously on educational underachievement by people. A wide range of people has engaged in doing that over the years. Your detailed work and your action plan build on all of that. I welcome the discussion that we have had about implementation. As you guys will know better than anybody else, redirecting investment and focusing it on early education, on the early education and childcare strategy and on full-time preschool places for all are long-standing recommendations.

My understanding is that the Department of Education paused the funding formula review. It took parents of special school children to prevent a reduction in special school nursery hours from full-time

hours, and we are still awaiting the early education and childcare strategy. Robust implementation and monitoring mechanisms are therefore essential. Perhaps that is one of the key recommendations and asks that the Committee can work towards to make sure that your robust work results in improved, equal educational opportunity for all children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Thank you very much for your time today. We have just about stuck to time. I appreciate it. Perhaps we will engage with you again in other formats as well.