



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Dyslexia Services: Education Authority

13 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Cynthia Currie	Education Authority
Mr Joe Healy	Education Authority
Ms Una Turbitt	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Una Turbitt, interim director of children and young people's services at the Education Authority (EA); Cynthia Currie, assistant director of children and young people's services at the Education Authority; and Joe Healy, head of literacy service at the children and young people's service of the Education Authority. You are very welcome. We will endeavour to give you approximately 10 minutes for opening comments, followed by questions from members. Thanks so much for being here today.

Ms Una Turbitt (Education Authority): First of all, thank you for inviting us to appear before the Education Committee during Dyslexia Awareness Month. Before I start, I thank Kate for sharing Aidan's and her family's lived experience. I realise that that was not an easy thing for her to do, and I assure her that we are listening. I also thank Rachel for her acknowledgement of the efforts being made by the literacy service. I hope that today we will be able to provide you with some useful context, and that the session helps to increase dyslexia awareness and an awareness of the role that the Education Authority plays in addressing the challenges faced by pupils, parents and schools.

At the outset, we fully recognise and accept that pupil services are under considerable strain and are not delivering as they need to be for the increasing number of children with special educational needs. Whilst progress is being made in, for example, the statutory assessment and review service, and additional school places for children with special educational needs were available for those commencing school in September 2020 and 2021, we now need to move to improve our pupil support services if we are to ensure that the barriers to learning are removed and that pupils benefit from increased confidence in their own ability and have the ability to achieve their goals. That includes transformation of the literacy service.

No one part of our education system on its own can create optimal support for those with dyslexia. The EA is firmly committed to working across its directorates with pupils, parents, schools, advocacy groups and key partners. The vehicle for that much-needed improvement is the special educational needs and disability transformation programme that is being led by the Department of Education and the Education Authority. This programme involves 14 key work streams that are designed with the needs of pupils at the centre. A reference group made up of advocacy groups, including the Children's Law Centre and representatives from across the education sector, has been established to facilitate meaningful and continuous engagement. Engagement events have commenced and have helped inform the development of a draft outline business case that has recently been submitted to the Department of Education. That engagement will continue throughout the programme so that there is a shared sense of ownership and public confidence in the future of the special educational needs system. Our ultimate goal is that all children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities, and their families, are receiving the tailored and effective supports that they need to secure the best education outcomes, delivered by a child-focused, responsive, coordinated, transparent, efficient and sustainable system.

It is of critical importance that we achieve a collective understanding of what works best for dyslexic learners; what constitutes early intervention and identification; and how, as an education system, we can deliver best practice that is informed by local and international evidence. We must identify how effective dyslexia-friendly education environments can be resourced in a sustainable manner to meet the needs of those with dyslexia and, indeed, with other learning needs.

The EA literacy service sits alongside a number of other pupil support services. The literacy service provides interventions relating to a range of literacy difficulties, including dyslexia. The term "dyslexia" is often used to cover a broad spectrum of literacy difficulties, including specific learning difficulties in literacy, literacy difficulties, dyslexic-type difficulties and, of course, dyslexia. Studies indicate that approximately 25% of pupils in Northern Ireland will experience some dyslexic-type difficulties and that around 10% will present difficulties that require additional supports to be provided. We recognise that dyslexia can impact on a child's learning and their life. We fully recognise that dyslexia often has social and emotional consequences that impact on children's self-esteem, behaviours, well-being and mental health.

The EA literacy service currently supports over 2,300 pupils through direct interventions with pupils in schools. In addition to the direct interventions, the service has worked with C2k to provide innovative cloud-based solutions for pupils, parents and schools. For example, the Read and Write technology programme allows the pupil to turn speech into text and text into speech. Evaluation of that program indicates that this approach increases pupil independence, self-esteem and attainment. The program is now widely accessible.

The literacy service has been working hard to reduce waiting times for pupils who are in need of intervention, using additional interim funding. The number of referrals received has been reduced during COVID and school closures. However, the service is anticipating a referral spike during this academic year, which will create further challenges for the service. The literacy service is planning to provide support for pupils who are waiting for direct interventions through the provision of immediate tailored advice to schools and parents and guidance relating to access to the digital technology resources.

The literacy service provides three main types of support. The first is support for all schools to create learning environments where dyslexic pupils can be empowered to succeed. Research shows that when education strategies to support people with dyslexia are implemented in the classroom, there are benefits for them and for all children. The literacy service provides access to resources and a training programme to support that approach, including a module specifically designed for classroom assistants. Advice is available to schools via a literacy service helpline and email address.

The second type of support is offered to pupils, parents and schools when recommendations have been made by an educational psychologist following the assessment of an individual pupil. Literacy advice is based on meeting the specific needs of that individual pupil within the classroom. Bespoke resources and follow-up training are provided for teachers and classroom assistants. Again, guidance is offered in the use of effective assistive technology.

The third type of support is the provision of direct intervention for an individual pupil or group of pupils from a specialist literacy teacher. That may be provided in school or remotely. Support programmes are delivered in a 16-week block. Following each block, the EA literacy service teacher, school staff,

the parent and the pupil review outcomes and plan future interventions as appropriate to the pupil's needs.

As I stressed at the outset, we recognise that pupil support services need to change within a transformed education system that meets the needs of all pupils with special educational needs. A key element of that will be the development of a multidisciplinary model that is available in a timely and effective way. I assure you that the staff working in our pupil support services accept the need for change and are passionate, committed and dedicated to delivering against what will be an ambitious agenda. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Una. We will go straight to questions, given that time is short.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Una, Joe and Cynthia, for the presentation this morning. I will get straight into questions.

From your opening remarks, you obviously watched the previous briefing, or at least saw some of it. As you said, Kate eloquently told the story of her son Aidan, the stresses that he has had and the challenges that they have faced as a family. You can tell that there are serious issues around how we support our children and young people with dyslexia. We really need to improve that. The Committee had an informal briefing from Dyslexia Awareness NI in September, and it was a similar kind of meeting, in which there was a deep sense of frustration and desperation among the parents. They felt at a loss; they were having to put up a big fight just to get the simplest support and resources for their children, knowing that simple interventions would make a huge difference to their children's lives. A lot of work still needs to be done.

From what Rachel and Liam told us, there are issues with data collection. Do you have access to the numbers of children throughout our system who are waiting for an assessment for dyslexia or who are dyslexic and need support and provision from you?

Ms Turbitt: Nicola, data collection is a critical point for improvement. We absolutely need to improve our data collection, and we need to understand what data we need in order to make a difference that will inform the changes required. The Education Authority is developing a data development strategy to enable us to pull information in a meaningful way from across our pupil support services and, indeed, all the EA services. We have some data in relation to dyslexia that we can share with you, but it is important to put that in the wider context of not just the literacy service but all the disciplines that contribute to children's special educational needs right across the system.

Cynthia, do you want to say something on the data, or do you want me to pass that to Joe?

Ms Cynthia Currie (Education Authority): The data is not as informative as we would want it to be. It is not that the data is not being collected on an individual child's baseline and outcomes; rather, we need a better way of analysing trends and we need to modernise our systems that collect the data. It is difficult to pinpoint from our current systems the number of children who have dyslexia, because our evidence-gathering base is wider; it is dyslexia and specific learning difficulties (SpLDs). We can say that there are 766 children in Northern Ireland who have a statement that names dyslexia as their primary need. There are then 855 children with a statement that names dyslexia as an additional need. That is 1,621 children with dyslexia named on their statement of need.

We also know from the Department and from Northern Ireland school census data that over 9,300 children have been listed as having dyslexia or specific literacy difficulties in 2021. Data is critical to improvement, as Una said, and we need to be able to capture that more effectively. We have been working on the waiting lists within the literacy service. Currently — Joe can correct me — 192 children are on a waiting list for the direct intervention support that was talked about. It is still 192 children who are waiting, but that is certainly an improving picture for the literacy service. We are not resting on our laurels, though, because we still do not know the impact of COVID.

Ms Brogan: Yes. It is likely that there will be a spike, as outlined in your presentation. Cynthia, I appreciate those facts and figures, but the point I was making is the one that you and Una touched upon: that we need greater data collection so that we know the trends out there and how to improve the services. I am glad that you have admitted that it is not up to scratch and that work needs to be done. I hope that the development strategy works and that the right effort is put in, because we need that to make proper, positive changes.

The other point that I want to touch upon is one that Rachel made in her presentation which I did not get to ask her about. It was about children in the Irish-medium education sector who have dyslexia that maybe has not been identified yet because, she said, of two issues. One was that there was a "wait and see" approach until children were in P4, which was going to be too late, according to Rachel, for proper early intervention and services, and the other was that the resources were not suitable for Irish-speaking children. What is the Education Authority doing to address that issue?

Ms Turbitt: Nicola, thank you for the question; I will take that one. We are working with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG). We have shared some information with it. Again, this relates to data. We are conscious that children in an Irish medium have particular needs and that we have a duty to promote their access to Irish-medium schools. Of the 251 children who have been involved in our transfer process this year, 239 have remained in Irish-medium settings, six have moved to mainstream, one has moved to a special school and five have moved to the specialist provision that we have set up. We are very conscious that we need to meet their needs in particular, and there is work under way to develop our resources — to translate them into Irish for parents and children. We are working on that with CnaG.

Mr Joe Healy (Education Authority): The literacy service sits on the cross-directorate working group with the Irish-medium sector. A senior member of our team who is an Irish speaker has come on board and is involved in that. We work closely in that forum to look at what can be best practice and what is happening in relation to SEN provision, dyslexia and Irish-medium down South. There is work to do in all those areas.

Ms Brogan: Thank you for that, Joe. I appreciate that you are doing the work to make positive steps, and of course I welcome that. However, it is frustrating to hear that children have had to leave the Irish-medium sector to go to other schools because the help and support is not there. That is not fair, but I appreciate that you are putting the effort in now to give the Irish-medium sector the proper support and resources. It is frustrating for them.

Chair, I know that you are trying to move me on, but I have one quick question about private dyslexia assessments. Will the Education Authority accept private assessments and diagnoses of dyslexia?

Mr Healy: Under our current model of provision and the interconnectedness between the educational psychology service and the literacy service, all referrals come to the literacy service from our colleagues in the educational psychology service. It is my understanding that, if a private assessment comes to the attention of the school and it brings it to the attention of our educational psychology service through the regular consultation process that our psychology service has with schools, the details and content of that report can be discussed and can form part of the conversation in relation to consideration for referral to the literacy service. That is where private reports sit, in my understanding, in the process.

Ms Turbitt: It is important to note that our educational psychologists are required to carry out an assessment where that is deemed to be appropriate. Yes, they will absolutely take into consideration any evidence that is presented by parents. That could be a private psychology assessment or a private dyslexia assessment or any other private assessment. However, we require our educational psychologists to carry out their own independent assessment.

Ms Brogan: All right, so they will work with families who have private assessments, but it is ultimately up to the Education Authority's own assessment?

Ms Turbitt: Yes.

Ms Brogan: Thanks so much to the three of you.

Mr Newton: Thanks to Una, Cynthia and Joe for being with us today. I want to continue on the collection of data. I am pleased about that, because the representatives of the Children's Law Centre placed a great deal of emphasis on that for the future.

I want to ask three fairly short questions. Do we know how many teachers take up a module on continuing professional development (CPD)? Do we know the level of peripatetic support that we have, and can that be quantified for Committee members? I know that the Committee has seen and has argued for many examples where there needs to be a joined-up approach between Departments,

particularly during the pandemic. Is there a connection between Health and Education at an early stage on the matter of dyslexia? And then a question that I posed in the previous evidence session: is there a school that has an ethos that stands out as an example of how it has addressed the issue of dyslexia?

Ms Turbitt: We will start with the school ethos; I will ask Cynthia to take that one.

Ms Currie: The question of school ethos and teacher professional learning that you mention is a critical conversation that we need to have. It is about getting a balance between already overloaded schools, particularly at present, and practitioners in the classroom being able to deal with all the challenges that schools presently have. However, it is also about being able to equip our professionals in the classroom so that, when they are faced with children who have particular needs, they can deal with those needs. That is absolutely critical in terms of early identification and supporting staff in schools to be able to carry out that early identification and to support pupils with their wider literacy needs. It is not just about early intervention, but you are absolutely right: that early stage is the stage where we want to make the most impact.

In schools and in early years settings, given that they also receive support, there are different ways of acknowledging and identifying that. It is not just the literacy service but the types of behaviours that children may demonstrate because they are frustrated with, for example, aspects of their language development that can be picked up by early years settings and our language communication service. Indeed, just to roll it into your other point about the links with Health, that service links very closely with speech therapy. Our educational psychologists tell us that children who experience difficulties at that early stage with language development often go on to require dyslexia support at a later stage.

It is about equipping our professionals to identify the signs of not just dyslexia but dyslexia behaviours and how those may manifest themselves in school. While peripatetic support is really valuable — we have shown that time and time again, and we absolutely need to have it there — we need to have a conversation about professional learning and how we support that further. While we in children and young people's services will do that on a child-focused basis, our colleagues in the school development service also do it through their wider strategies and programmes. There are schools that have an aptitude for it, and one of the strategies that our school development service uses is the gathering of case studies in order to inform other aspects of practice. It would be unfair to point to one school. There certainly are a few in my mind that, if we were to gather case studies, we could go to. However, it would be unfair to point to those schools in this morning's session. Be assured that there is excellent practice going on across many of our schools. We need to disseminate that more carefully.

Professional learning, in its widest sense, is partly about training sessions and how many people turn up at them. It is also about peer dissemination and ongoing professional development, right through from teacher training college throughout a professional's life. I am very passionate about this, as you know. In any debate about dyslexia, professional learning and support for practitioners in the classroom is critical.

Ms Turbitt: Thank you, Cynthia. The joined-up approach that you mentioned, Robin, is critical. We cannot do this alone. We need to work in a collaborative way. As Rachel said, we have a duty to cooperate. We have a SEN steering group that is about implementation of the new framework. That is jointly chaired by officials in the Department of Education and the Department of Health. We also have working groups. We have had workshops with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and our health and social care trust colleagues to establish or develop those relationships and make sure that what we do makes sense from both perspectives. It is critical that we do that.

The other thing to say is that we have a finite resource. We need to make sure that we maximise the benefit and the effectiveness of that resource. That is why collaboration is so important. I will ask Joe to quantify the number of specialist literacy teachers who are employed by the EA in the service.

Mr Healy: Thanks, Una. Thank you, Robin. On the continuing professional development of teachers and teacher professional learning, I signpost committee members to pages 8, 9 and 10 of the briefing note that we provided you with for this morning's session. That gives an outline, albeit brief, of what has gone into the schools estate in order to build capacity in the area of literacy difficulties and dyslexia over the last 15 to 19 years. One of the challenges for us in helping schools to build their capacity for supporting dyslexic-type learners is that there is an awful lot out there, and there needs to be more cohesion in bringing that all together and up to date. In this academic year, my colleagues in

the literacy service have 17 modules focusing on different aspects of dyslexia, SpLDs and literacy. They are targeted at the whole breadth of the school community. They are targeted at supporting schools, parents, classroom assistants and teachers. The field of dyslexia and the topic is very broad, very comprehensive and very cross-cutting with other special educational needs, especially in the area of speech, language and communication. There is a direct line between the training that the language and communication service provides and the training that the literacy service provides.

Our training is constructed in such a way that school leaders can look at it as a menu, and they can look at their own audit and staffing needs, class development in school, and they can draw down from our menu what they feel would fit best within their whole school needs and whole school development planning process. So, it fits within the broader picture of the school improvement strategy and wider strategic development and class development. That is the here and now.

The first part of your question was about how many teachers have accessed modules or training. That has, maybe, been more focused on specialist skills development. Some £3-4 million was put into the SEN CPD literacy development project, run jointly between Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University about five to six years ago over a two- to three-year period.

Through that project, approximately 350 teachers across the school estate in schools now have attained approved teacher status or associate membership status with the British Dyslexia Association. As a follow-on from that funded project, some of those staff have taken things further and have gone on to achieve master's degree qualifications in literacy difficulties.

That project was quite far-reaching in its offer to the primary school sector. Every primary school in Northern Ireland was offered the opportunity to have two members of staff take part in the training, one to do the m-level modules that you might be referring to, Robin, and then another member of staff to be there for peer support and to work as a team with that teacher in the dissemination of the training and good practice back in schools.

Altogether, at the end of that project, as well as those more deeply trained teachers with those qualifications, approximately 5,140 teachers in our primary schools were trained through that capacity building programme. It was very extensive, and I should add that it was very positively evaluated by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) at the post-evaluation review stage.

Very briefly, the last thing that I will say is that, in the last couple of pages in the briefing paper, you will see a range of training initiatives linked with stuff that is going on across the water around best practice in literacy. That has knitted together, and, in our current CPD offer for schools, we have tried to amalgamate everything that has gone on here and absorb the international research as well and put it into that universal offer for all primary and post-primary schools in the country.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We are really short on time, Robin, if you could keep it brief.

Mr Newton: Just very quickly, has the programme that you referred to that involved 350 trained teachers now concluded?

Mr Healy: The funded element of that programme has concluded, but it is fair to say that, through the literacy service, the evidence-based approaches and research has followed on into the EA schools-based training. A good percentage of my staff and my senior staff were involved in the project as lecturers and tutors and continue to be involved in the current postgraduate programme in Stranmillis on literacy difficulties. So, the programme came to an end, but one of the nice things about that project is the professional learning and development that it has perpetuated and which continues to percolate through the support that is available to schools.

Mr McNulty: Hi, Una, Cynthia and Joe, and thank you for your evidence. Rachel Hogan from the Children's Law Centre made a point that struck me, and it is a very important one: has the EA spoken to children?

Ms Turbitt: Yes. As part of the SEN transformation team, the Youth Service is facilitating the engagement with children, which is critical. We all have to listen to children because there is an assumption that we, as adults, know what children want and need. A lot of our children do not necessarily want a classroom assistant following them round when they are in post-primary education nor do they want to be taken out of their class. They want support in the way that they want it, so you are absolutely right: we have to listen to our children and provide them with support where and how

they want it. That might mean providing the support after school or providing it in other ways. We are using our Youth Service to facilitate that, and it has the experience and is well able to do so. We are looking forward to the feedback that we get from young people, and I would open the door to any young person who has lived experiences and wants to meet with us. As I said in my opening remarks, we are listening and we want to listen, because that is the only way that we will get this right.

Mr McNulty: That is reassuring to hear; thank you for that, Una.

Secondary schools have been resourced, to a degree, to address special educational needs in-house through their remedial departments, but primary schools have no such facility. Does that not fly in the face of the whole idea of early intervention and its importance?

Ms Turbitt: That is a good question. Cynthia, is there anything that you want to say on that?

Ms Currie: Post-primary education is also my background. If you were to ask many post-primary teachers, they would probably say that they are not as well equipped on some of the issues as they would want to be. I absolutely agree with you. As I said in the first answer, early intervention is absolutely key. The classroom teacher, the early years' classroom assistant or whomever is working alongside the children is the person who will identify the needs in children at a very early stage. As I said earlier, we need to get better at supporting those people to provide early identification and early support. That will mean that we are able to put in place the basic strategies. For many children, those strategies work, which lets us get to those children who absolutely need more intense support. I could not agree more: resource is our key issue.

Ms Turbitt: I listened to the previous session and heard a reference to there being 37 children in a class, which was alarming. We need to make sure that our classes are well equipped to create what we have referred to as dyslexic-friendly classrooms. We also need to make sure that they are equipped to deal with other learning needs, given that we know that there is a high prevalence of ADHD and that there are children with autism. The classroom is a complex place for teachers to provide good learning experiences for all children, and it is important that there are the resources to do that.

Mr McNulty: There were 37 children in my primary school class, and I am one of the survivors.

One hundred per cent of appeals by the Children's Law Centre have been successful. The Children's Law Centre's view on the reason for there being no data on dyslexia and a reluctance to provide it is that the Education Authority recognises that it does not have the resource to help the children who need support. You touched on the data, Cynthia, when you mentioned the 5,400 teachers being trained and approved. Sorry, I think Joe mentioned that number; you mentioned the 1,100 children who have been identified as having dyslexia, the 192 children who are waiting on direct interactive support and the 1,600 who have been identified as having dyslexia as part of their need. Compared with the one in 10 figure, which Dyslexia Awareness NI (DANI) reckons is the number of children who have dyslexia, those figures are the tip of the iceberg. Are you worried that the data that you have is very short of the truth?

Ms Turbitt: Absolutely. The data is not where we need it to be, and we are all clear on that. There is absolutely no intent on our part to not develop a data set in order to not provide services. We want to be open and transparent, and we have said that at previous Committee meetings. It is about being open and transparent: we are putting everything on the table. We will develop our data sets, and that will be shared in a public manner.

Ms Currie: Do you mind if I add to that? One of the issues that we are touching on is the unmet need. We need to get to where we need to be on that issue. We are about to begin a project. Psychology will work with a sample of schools using an in-depth consultation to look at the unmet need there may be across a section of schools. We hope to get a report on that to help us move in a particular direction with unmet need.

There has been much mention of the provisional criteria on the aspects of resources and the number of children. We all agree that the provisional criteria were put together a number of years ago, in 2009, potentially in a different context. It was about giving equality of resources. I believe that, through the SEN strategic development programme, we will look at that provisional criteria again. We will look at whether that is the best way to identify children. We await the regulations under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 to ensure that whatever we do is in tune

with the legislation. We also have silo services at the moment. We need to make sure that we are not just trying to fix one service and need; the review of support services must be multi-disciplinary. The services will interact and link in identifying and dealing with that need in different ways.

Mr McNulty: Thanks. That was one of my figures earlier. Apologies for any confusion I created. Rachel Hogan mentioned that 100% of the Children's Law Centre's appeals have been successful. We have heard Kate McKeown's story about Aidan, and that family's experience is akin to trying to climb Mount Everest in a storm. Why is that the case? I have a similar case in my office involving a mother who is fighting for the support that her daughter deserves. We all have cases like that coming through our offices. Why do parents have to fight for the support they need?

Ms Turbitt: It should not be like that. We do not want parents fighting for their children's needs. We have said before at the Committee that we want to take the fight out of the service at all levels, including the fight that parents feel that they have to go through. We are looking at the number of tribunals that we have conceded on the steps and all of that. There is a comprehensive piece of work going on that is looking at some individual cases. We are working with our legal team to get a thorough understanding of why that is happening, and we will come up with recommendations and suggestions to deal with that. I expect that report to be available at the end of November or early December. Again, that report will be shared with the Committee, and, hopefully, we will all learn from that.

Mr McNulty: Thank you. Chair, I have one more question. I do not doubt for one second your authenticity and determination to make an impact. I have a question that follows up on something that Nicola touched on earlier. A study on dyslexia assessments for pupils in Irish-medium education in 2017 found that the current practice of identifying dyslexia is not optimal for immersive pupils and completely inaccurate for native Irish-speaking pupils. How can we ensure that assessments are fit for purpose for pupils in the Irish-medium sector?

Ms Currie: Our educational psychologists have been working on that particular area. I do not have that information with me today. I can assure you that the psychology service has worked alongside CnaG and others on the back of that report. They have been looking at the current assessment process and reviewing its appropriateness. I do not have any more information on that.

Ms Turbitt: Some educational psychologists tell us that, for most effect, they need to carry out assessments in the child's first language, and when we have a child who is a native Irish speaker — the first language is Irish — we have an educational psychologist, who will carry out that assessment regardless of where the child lives.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, folks.

Mr Butler: Thank you, team. You will be saved from looking at my face; my camera is on the blink. I hope that you do not mind me asking this question, but we got a tabled pack last night. It came in quite late, and I think that the reason was that some of the information did not come to the Committee until late. Do you guys have to send all your information to the Department to be checked before it is sent?

Ms Turbitt: First of all, I apologise for the delay. There may have been some delay in the EA being invited or being informed that we were appearing today, so, obviously, we needed some time to put that paper together, and that has probably contributed to the delay.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that, Una.

Ms Turbitt: We do not get approval. We do not send our submissions for approval from DE; no. This is our submission. We stand over it, sign it and take accountability for it.

Mr Butler: Grand. I appreciate that. That is the important point, to be honest. If you are waiting on timely information from me sometimes — I am the world's worst procrastinator. I totally get that it will sometimes come late. I was just interested in whether it has to go through a vetting process with the Department or not. I appreciate that it is signed off and it is yours.

I will go back to the provisional criteria that were talked about five or 10 minutes ago. The provisional criteria are out of date. If those criteria are still being used, is it not a weakness to any defence if, for instance, the EA is in a dispute with a parent, or are those criteria, maybe, not being used?

Ms Currie: Those criteria are still there because, in many ways, we do not have a viable alternative at the moment. In practice, we have been trying to look at the implementation of those provisional criteria child by child and potentially not being as rigid in our delivery and use of the provisional criteria. That being said, we absolutely need some type of framework. Unfortunately, we do not have an infinite pot of money, so we need some type of framework. We do not have another at this time. As I mentioned earlier, we absolutely need another framework. That is one of our first priorities in working through the SEN strategic development programme, because those provisional criteria have an impact on stage 3 and stage 5 services.

Mr Butler: Thank you. The Children's Law Centre stated that it reckons that there are 35,000 dyslexic children in Northern Ireland. Forgive me if I missed this — I had to take a call when some of the other questions were being asked — but did someone ask a question about that? Do you guys estimate that to be an accurate figure or not?

Ms Turbitt: We will pass that one to Joe.

Mr Healy: We are back to prevalence rates again. For any English-speaking jurisdiction that is addressing dyslexia at a national level, the first big challenge is prevalence rates. The most recent figures that we have for Northern Ireland indicate that, in a primary-3-age-group sample of children with whom this issue was explored, between 24% — in the first study — and 27% of children presented with some degree of dyslexic-type indicator. As you know, that is over a quarter of the school-based population of 335,000 children and young people. The figure of one in 10 is a widely circulated figure on children who may have a level of need that may require intervention and support — higher-level differentiation — and a carefully structured, cumulative, multisensory phonics programme that is evidence-based. That is the 10%. Like with all our SEN categories, with that quarter of the school-based population, there is a continuum of need, but, even within that continuum of need, it is not a sliding scale on which every child, at each degree of the scale, is the same.

Dyslexia is a complex issue. It has multiple causes, and its remediation requires multiple strategies. If one strategy is not working, you try another. That is maybe partly why the data on exactly how many children have a diagnosis of dyslexia is not immediately available. It is a complex field, and the statistics within it are complex. However, I am sure that the finer detail will be explored in the context of the review of the literacy service and all other related services.

Mr Butler: OK. Thank you. With regard to educational psychology, Una, this is probably in the wider look at special educational needs with the review, the reform and the transformation. You guys have been incredibly busy with that and have done excellent work. However, I have raised this before, in dealing with some historical difficulties and the here and now and the future, what does the burden look like for educational psychology and has that been factored into future-proofing the process of identifying those children who have needs?

Ms Turbitt: We need to look carefully at the educational psychologist role. They are experts and provide us with advice in relation to children with special educational needs and the provision that is most appropriate, so we are absolutely dependent on them.

We need to make sure that we are maximising their input where it is most needed, and that is something that we are looking at now. We have a couple of problems. We have a problem in that we do not have educational psychologists that we can recruit. They are not out there. There is a scarcity of educational psychologists. We are exploring how we can support them. That might involve the introduction of a psychology assistant — a qualified psychologist, someone with a psychology degree, who is not an educational psychologist but will have sufficient knowledge and experience, and support from an educational psychologist — to try to create a skill mix within that team. We are exploring that as an interim measure.

We will have to look at the role of the educational psychologist in relation to what has been referred to as gatekeeping, how they interact with others, and how we take their role and make sure that they are providing all the services, with support, in order to maximise the impact of all services. One thing that we did, which is related to additional provisions that were set up this year and last year, was introduce a multidisciplinary team. Educational psychologists are part of that, as are representatives from our autism service, literacy service, behaviour support service and early years service. They are coming together to look at the profile of children in those settings, and at the needs of classroom staff —

teachers and classroom assistants — and coming up with a multidisciplinary plan that will support the provisions to create effective, safe, secure and nurturing environments where children can learn.

A lot of learning will be coming from that. We are looking forward to the evaluation of that work, and I have no doubt that it will inform how we move forward with the role of educational psychologists.

Mr Butler: I appreciate the work you have to do. Why are there no educational psychologists coming through, Una?

Ms Turbitt: One reason is that we have not trained enough of them. We reduced the number of students on the training programme. It takes them three years to come through. They are primarily a female workforce. I am not sure what impact that has, but I have no doubt that it has some impact. A combination of factors have resulted in a situation where we cannot recruit. We are not on our own in that. We went across the water to try to recruit, but there are similar issues there.

Mr Butler: I will, maybe, have a discussion with a school of psychology or something on this because it is something that we need to be addressing now and looking into it. It is a worthy job and excellent role. I am sure you are looking at it.

Ms Turbitt: We are working with the Department to increase the cohort of student educational psychologists over the next three years.

Mr Butler: Brilliant. Thank you, Una.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, guys, for the presentation so far. I nipped out to take a call, so, if I ask something that has already been asked, I apologise. I want to interrogate the figures so far. The Children's Law Centre indicated to us that there is a vast number of young people and children who have dyslexia but whose needs are not formally identified. You indicated that about 1,600 children have statements with dyslexia as a primary reason for the statement or named on the statement as a contributing issue. You also said that 9,300 children may have dyslexia or literacy difficulties.

Ms Turbitt: Not every child with dyslexia will require a statement of special educational needs.

Mrs Dodds: I am coming to that, Una. That is a very important point that you have just made. Not every child with dyslexia will require a statement of special educational needs, but many parents go for a statement because they cannot get the help at the earlier stages — stages 1 to 3 — in the system. What are you doing to help those children? There is a lot work in progress, but I really want to get to the figures and the work that you are doing.

Ms Turbitt: I think that Cynthia touched on the issue of unmet need. We do not know the number of children who have not been brought to the Education Authority. We know that they are there. We have a limited educational psychology resource and a time-allocation model in that regard. I think that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) recommendations were referred to in the earlier session. The PAC has asked for a review of all pupil support services. That will be an independent review, which we welcome and are looking forward to. We will fully engage with that review. There is no doubt in any of our minds that there are children in schools whom we are not connected to. We support them through some of the supports that have been referred to through capacity-building with teachers, but there are limits to the number of children who are coming in to the EA. The fact is that we do not know the detail of that. It is something that we need to work through.

Mrs Dodds: That is really quite a statement: "We do not know how many children have unmet need in relation to dyslexia". It is only one element of the children with wider educational needs whom you deal with. It really is quite a statement. It is something that the Committee should return to. It is startling.

You told me that there are 192 children — the qualification should be "whom you know of" — who are waiting for direct intervention from the literacy support unit but have not yet got it. Am I right?

Ms Turbitt: That is correct.

Mrs Dodds: What are those children's waiting times? What do they range from? Six months? Two months? One year? What are the longest and shortest waiting times for those children?

Mr Healy: You will have seen from the paper that we currently support 3,400-odd children with direct intervention. At the tail end of the referral list from educational psychology will be the 192 children who have not yet been picked up for direct intervention. About half of those children will have been referred to the literacy service between 1 September and yesterday. The other half will have been referred between mid April and the end of August. That is the time frame that those 192 children have been waiting. The longest-waiting of those children will have been referred to the literacy service in April or May of the last academic year.

We have been trying to develop, within our capacity, to be as responsive to referrals as we can. We have recruited and put together an internal team that is dedicated solely to referred children whom we cannot immediately pick up for direct intervention, ie teaching. At the end of this month, that team will be operationalised. It will contact parents and schools. It will create a remote, virtual learning environment in which to support schools and teachers, give advice and guidance and provide digital resources. We are also building a virtual learning environment on the C2k system so that class teachers can access resources. It will signpost teachers to those resources. That gives you a context for the 192 children who are waiting and what will happen between now and when they are picked up for direct intervention. Diane, the latest that those children will receive teaching will be February 2022.

Mrs Dodds: Those children have been referred for literacy intervention. What is the age group of those children?

Mr Healy: The majority are primary-school children. I do not have the exact detail of the 192 children in front of me, but the majority are primary-school referrals.

Mrs Dodds: So, at a really crucial time in their development, some of those children could be waiting most of a year for literacy intervention.

Mr Healy: Yes. The minority will wait the longest time. You are talking about a timeline of children coming to the service, so —

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate that, Joe. I am not being difficult, but this is close to my heart. As I explained in the previous session, when I was a teacher, many years ago, I taught small groups of children with literacy difficulties. This is absolutely close to my heart.

We know from the 'A Fair Start' report and a number of other things that, if we are to improve children's chances, we have to intervene quickly and early. If a child who is seven, for example, is waiting for a year to get that intervention — they are not getting the intervention quicker and earlier — you can see why parents would automatically jump to the statutory stages of intervention. That intervention could be a range of things; I understand that. It could be interventions in the school with good support, up-to-date resources and so on for teachers. Many children will benefit from that and will not need any more intervention, but some children will progressively need more and more intervention.

I have another question, Chair, but I will ask this first: why is the support service virtual and not face to face with children?

Mr Healy: We have to manage our resources to best effect, insofar as we can. We had a pot of resources that we could dedicate to that work. We will review it as the year progresses to see if there is a need for additional resources to respond to those children who are waiting.

As you will know, Diane, direct teaching intervention is an expensive resource. We have a team of just under 160 teachers who are travelling around the country providing one-to-one direct intervention. Those staff have to be fully timetabled to maximise their deployment — their contact with children and the impact that the interventions make. As I think was mentioned earlier, our year is divided into half, almost in a semesterised system. The teachers are timetabled for 16 weeks and progress is evaluated. The next part of the timetable rolls for another 16 weeks. Because of the nature of the resource and of the service model, delivery and build, it is extremely hard to be immediately responsive and to provide direct intervention, so —

Mrs Dodds: I —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No, Diane. I am sorry to cut across you, but that is almost 10 minutes.

Mrs Dodds: Can I ask a final question?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): A final question, Diane.

Mrs Dodds: First, it seems to me that children who have literacy difficulties will not benefit most if they do not have face-to-face teaching. Secondly, how many children in Northern Ireland are waiting on the production of the statement, and how many are waiting on an evaluation from an educational psychologist?

Ms Turbitt: I will take the question on the statementing process separately. We have made progress on our compliance with the 26-week statutory time frame. At the end of March, we were 100% compliant. In June, we received a very significant surge in the number of referrals requesting a decision on the statementing process. It virtually doubled, which has caused us quite a challenge. We are not 100% compliant, but we are definitely a lot better than we were a couple of years ago.

I do not have the figure in front of me, but, if I recall, we have something like under 40 children who are beyond the 26-week compliance time frame and who do not have a valid exception in relation to that assessment. We have put additional resource in. We recognise it, and we know every one of those children. They are monitored by the head of service and Cynthia, as the assistant director. We have put additional resource into dealing with that surge. I expect that that figure will come down again next month or in the month after that.

Ms Currie: Our last validated dataset of 31 August showed the open cases going through stage 4. There were 2,195 children going through that process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Healy: I want to clarify one point that — apologies to Diane — may have been misunderstood. You asked why teaching is virtual. We do not do virtual teaching unless it is requested by the school or parent, or because of COVID-related issues. I was talking about the virtual environment for providing advice and guidance to the school.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, thanks. I will bring in Harry Harvey. Harry, if you are brief enough, you may give me a chance to ask a question as well. Thanks.

Mr Harvey: Sure. I will do that. Thank you, Una, Cynthia and Joe. What are the characteristics of a dyslexia-friendly school?

Mr Healy: The Department of Education has produced the 'Developing a Dyslexia-Friendly Learning Environment' guidance document for schools to map their way through that. It takes schools through the development of a dyslexia-friendly learning environment from ages three to four right up through the system. That is a very solid and well-grounded document. It also takes schools through developing their dyslexia policy, which sits alongside their broader whole-curriculum literacy policy. It is recommended, as good practice, that schools develop their own dyslexia policy. Some schools have also gone down the road of linking with the British Dyslexia Association and achieving quality kite mark status with that association.

A dyslexia-friendly environment is a school in which dyslexia awareness is raised at the highest level that it can be across the entire school community in terms of what is visually available throughout the school, the teaching and learning, the professional development of staff, curriculum delivery and school development planning. As dyslexia is the highest incidence of SEN cases, it is good practice for all schools to be cognisant of building a dyslexia-friendly learning environment across all phases of the education system. I have cited just one document, but a broader range of guidance is available for schools.

Mr Harvey: I appreciate that. Can you tell me whether the EA is acting on the recent recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee? I am sure that you have seen the recent recommendations of the PAC.

Ms Turbitt: Absolutely. Those are being taken very seriously. We are working closely with the Department of Education on all of those recommendations. We look forward to those being

implemented, particularly the first and second recommendations relating to the review of our pupil support services. It is an independent review and we look forward to its recommendations being implemented, as that will help us to take this work forward.

Mr Harvey: Excellent. Thank you for your answers, Una, Cynthia and Joe.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Good questions, Harry. Thanks for those.

Una, I will try to be as concise as I can. How far under capacity is the EA pupil support service?

Ms Turbitt: That is a how-long-is-a-piece-of-string question, as we do not know exactly what we will be doing or what the model will need to look at. Yes, we are currently under strain. We do not have enough staff to meet need, hence we have waiting lists and are trying to maximise the resource. However, it is not just about throwing more of the same at the service.

When we looked at the statement and assessment service, we had to take time to understand what the service should look like and where we needed to put in additional resource in order to make a difference. We are in a much better place when it comes to the statementing process and the team that is responsible for that. We know what we need there. We need to go through the same process with all of the other services to make sure that we maximise the public resource that has been put into those services. That will allow us to determine what the model will look like and what skills, knowledge and competencies we require to achieve excellence. That will inform what additional resource we will require. The SEN —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Ms Turbitt: I will just say that the SEN transformation programme — which, certainly from our perspective, will hopefully be approved in the near future — has a time frame of 18 months. We are working through that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. In what way is the EA pupil support service under capacity, given that you have acknowledged its failure to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs?

Ms Turbitt: Most of our resources are people; they are staff. Most of our resources and costs are within our own team. The literacy service is a very good example of that. It has done work on technology development and supporting and empowering children through technology. We need to do more of that across all of our services.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. What is wrong with the provisional criteria for dyslexia support?

Ms Currie: Basically, the criteria are outdated and fairly rigid. They are potentially narrow. We have talked a lot about unmet need. We need to try to reach out to as many children as possible but ensure that the children who most require services get those services. The criteria need a revamp. Joe might want to say more on that in relation to dyslexia but, in general, those are fairly rigid criteria that are not conducive to supporting the type of open support services that we want.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Why have the provisional criteria for dyslexia support been allowed to become outdated and rigid?

Mr Healy: Removing or changing the criteria would have a system-wide impact in relation to literacy difficulties — and possibly other SENs, although those are not my area. When we carry out a review of the literacy service, we will need to evaluate where the provisional criteria sit. We need to know what the evidence base is for the identification of literacy difficulties and the different parameters within the provisional criteria.

The literacy service would openly welcome a review of the criteria. Some of the impacts were touched on earlier by Liam, Rachel and Kate. The criteria have such significant impacts that, to tackle them on their own and in isolation from reviewing services in parallel, is probably too complicated a task to undertake.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Who sets the provisional criteria?

Ms Turbitt: As I understand it, the criteria were developed by the education and library boards. There is no doubt that the criteria need to be reviewed. We need and want to look at them. The criteria do not facilitate the balance that we need between making sure that children have access to earlier interventions and supporting those children who are most in need of very specialist support. A review of the criteria is part of the work that needs to happen, and I have no doubt that the criteria will change significantly over the next year or so.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Who is responsible for the provisional criteria becoming outdated and rigid?

Ms Turbitt: We are responsible. I am now responsible. I assure you and the Committee that we understand that the criteria are a barrier and that we are addressing that. I am now responsible for moving this forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am encouraged by that, Una. I am genuinely interested to know how we got to this place, given that the provisional criteria seem to be so critical to access to support. However, I will move beyond that for now. Maybe the review programme will look at that.

You acknowledge the need for review. You said that the literacy service review will be part of a wider, multidisciplinary review under the integrated multidisciplinary model of pupil support, with a two-year time frame to August 2023. The Children's Law Centre and the parent advocate are very clear that that review should be independent and rapid. The current review format does not seem to be either independent or rapid. Do you care to respond?

Ms Turbitt: They were coming at this from a number of different angles. An independent review will be carried out. DE is commissioning that review, and it will provide us with information on our services that is absolutely independent. It will tell us whether our services are fit for purpose, what is working well, what is not working so well and what we need to change. We look forward to that. The SEN strategic development programme will be informed by that review. We are opening our doors and working through the reference group. Rachel is involved in that group. Parent advocacy groups are welcome to contribute to it. Anything that is being taken forward, including any proposals for change, is being taken through that group in a very open way. As I said earlier, Chris, we will not get the improvement to the service in a sustainable way if we do not do that. This is not about us going away, coming up with a service design and saying, "Here you are: we are going to do it to you." That will not happen.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Are teachers adequately trained and empowered, initially and continually, to assist with dyslexia support?

Mr Healy: I will comment on initial teacher training. In the context of a review of the literacy service, teacher professional learning will be a crucial component of what will be looked at, in respect of what is happening here and elsewhere. There is definitely scope for us, in Northern Ireland, to look at how dyslexia appears on the curriculum of teacher education for teachers entering the school system. That needs to link and map on to a programme of continuing professional development that teachers have access to when they are post qualification and in schools. Without doubt, it needs to be as broad-ranging as possible across the teacher-education community. Every teacher in the education system, no matter the capacity that they are working in or the age of the children who they are working with, will work with dyslexic children.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Who is responsible for putting in place a plan to ensure that teachers are adequately trained and empowered, initially and continually, to assist with dyslexia support?

Ms Currie: In answer to your previous question, Chris: in true teacher-report fashion, there are very good features, but there is definitely room for improvement. Who is responsible? It is a joint responsibility between us and our colleagues in the school development service, who look at the wider literacy framework and where this fits in to school improvement strategies in schools. You will see in the children and young people's services (CYPS) training calendar that we are targeting specific needs. It is the responsibility of our school leaders to look at professional development in their school. It is the responsibility of universities and training colleges. It is a landscape that we need to work together in, but we take responsibility for providing a framework for training on dyslexia.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. A teacher who is teaching a class of 37 pupils probably needs to be a miracle worker, never mind trained in dyslexia support.

These are my final questions. You referred to positive work in relation to specialist qualifications gained by the DE CPD literacy difficulties programme that, for some, leads to approved teacher status and associate membership of the British Dyslexia Association. Are there enough literacy service specialist peripatetic teachers?

Mr Healy: Ultimately, we will know when we get into the review and into pupil support service design what specialist qualified teachers we need across the school estate, whether out in schools or working peripatetically.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have I understood the connection correctly? Kate made specific reference to the effectiveness of the peripatetic support that Aidan received in removing barriers to education for him as a dyslexic pupil. If literacy service specialist peripatetic teachers are a vital tool in dyslexia support, do we have enough of them?

Ms Turbitt: Chris, we could say: no, we do not. However, we have to be clear about what works for children and make sure that we understand what the evidence is and what input and support is provided for each child in order to help them —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Una, did you hear the evidence? Am I right to connect the two things? When Kate referred to peripatetic support for Aidan, is it a fair assumption that that was a reference to literacy service specialist peripatetic support? If it was, that is one testimony that that is vital. If there are not enough of those, is this not the time to say so and to try to get resources for more?

Ms Turbitt: We are saying that we do not have enough of them. If we had enough, we would not have a waiting list. In the current model, we do not have enough. However, we need to understand that what worked for Kate's son worked for Kate's son. That is very important, but what worked for him will not necessarily work for other children. We need to be very careful about assumptions. When we are looking at the evidence of what actually works, how can we make sure that children are supported in a way that works for all children? There will be tiers of intervention.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have two quick final questions that, hopefully, speak to that. What is the average waiting time for a child to access literacy service specialist peripatetic teacher support?

Mr Healy: As I indicated in response to Diane's question, 192 children are waiting. They have been waiting along the line of referral from April to now. I think that I explained to Diane that direct intervention will commence for those children together, in an uplift of pupils, in February.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So, almost a year.

Mr Healy: Yes, but not for the majority of them. For instance, 100 of them have been referred since 1 September. That cohort of children will have been waiting from September to January and will be picked up in February.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Why are literacy support services not available to children with no statement of special educational needs?

Mr Healy: In the previous session, Liam probably hit the nail on the head when he said that a Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) has no regard for resourcing. However, the Education Authority and the literacy service has to have due regard for the provisional criteria because, imperfect as they are, those are what we have available to us at the moment to try to achieve as fair and equitable a distribution of resources as we can. We strive to apply the provisional criteria to distribute resources equitably.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I always try to look for hope, but it would be remiss of us not to conclude that the pupil support service is under-resourced and working off outdated and rigid criteria.

Mr Healy: The service needs a review, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Obviously, we look forward to interacting with you on that review. We may get some more details about the terms of reference of the review. Whilst we proceed with the current provision and await the outcome of that review, this is a concerning picture for children who need access to pupil support.

Ms Turbitt: Chris, as I said at the outset, we share that concern. We know that we are absolutely reliant on this work over the next 18 months to deal with what has been a growing and long-term issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Folks, I appreciate the time that you have given us today. I know that you are determined to make progress on this, but it is clear that a huge amount of work needs to be done to get children the support that they need. We wish you well in that regard, and we look forward to meeting you again in the future.

Ms Turbitt: Thank you for having us.

Mr Healy: Thank you.

Ms Currie: Thank you.