



Public Accounts Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Inquiry into 'Closing the Gap — Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment': Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement**

4 November 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Public Accounts Committee

Inquiry into 'Closing the Gap — Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment': Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement

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

Mr William Humphrey (Chairperson)

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Cathal Boylan

Ms Órlaithí Flynn

Mr David Hilditch

Ms Cara Hunter

Mr Andrew Muir

### **Witnesses:**

Mr Stuart Stevenson

Department of Finance

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

Mr Rodney Allen

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Mr Kyle Bingham

Northern Ireland Audit Office

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** We are delighted to have with us this afternoon Dr Noel Purdy, who is the director of the centre for research in educational underachievement at Stranmillis University College; Joyce Logue, who is the principal of Long Tower Primary School; Mary Montgomery, who is the principal of Belfast Boys' Model School; Kathleen O'Hare, who is a retired principal of Hazelwood Integrated College and a former principal of St Cecilia's College in Londonderry; and Jackie Redpath MBE, who is chief executive of the Greater Shankill Partnership.

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to our inquiry into 'Closing the Gap — Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment'. I invite Dr Purdy and colleagues to make a presentation to the Committee. After you have made your presentation, which will hopefully be about 10 minutes long, although we will not be prescriptive on that, hopefully you will take some questions.

**Dr Noel Purdy (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement):** Thank you, Chair, for your welcome and invitation to come to the Public Accounts Committee to tell you more about the work and recommended actions of the expert panel on educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. Before I begin, I will introduce myself and my fellow panel members. I am Dr Noel Purdy, the director of the centre for research in educational underachievement here at Stranmillis University College. My fellow panel members are Joyce Logue, who is the principal of Long Tower Primary School in Derry/Londonderry; Mary Montgomery, who is the principal of Belfast Boys' Model School; Kathleen

O'Hare, who is the former principal of St Cecilia's College in Derry/Londonderry and Hazelwood Integrated College in Belfast; and Jackie Redpath, who is chief executive of the Greater Shankill Partnership.

As you are aware, we began our work in September 2020, thereby fulfilling the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and to draw up an action plan for change that will ensure that all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life. We published our final report and action plan, entitled 'A Fair Start', on 1 June this year, and were delighted that it was endorsed by the then Education Minister, Peter Weir, and all five parties of the Northern Ireland Executive. We have subsequently met with the new Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen, and her senior officials and have been encouraged by her strong support for the implementation of the 'A Fair Start' report.

It was an enormous privilege for all of us to work in this important area of policy. Educational underachievement is a cross-cutting issue that spans multiple Departments, policy areas and disciplines. Our review of educational underachievement and the many issues that impact upon it has shown us just how many factors are at play during the educational journey of a child. We had to consider each of the various factors as we listened, discussed and debated the issues with the hundred of stakeholders that we met. I thank those individuals, policymakers, public representatives, teachers, school leaders, business representatives, children and young people, and families, parents and carers for their truly invaluable input to the process.

As a consequence of our evidence-gathering, we developed our report and action plan, which covers eight key areas: redirecting the focus to early years; championing emotional health and well-being; ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum and assessment; promoting a whole-community approach to education; maximising boys' potential; driving forward teachers' professional learning; supporting the professional learning and well-being of school leadership; and, finally, ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery. Each of those areas plays an important part in helping to address educational underachievement, but they do not exist in isolation; each one builds on the next. Together, we believe that the action plan will make a demonstrable improvement to children and young people's learning outcomes.

The first key area is redirecting the focus to early years. Action in that key area will result in a noticeable improvement in children being ready to start school. Parents and families will be more knowledgeable about their children's development and how to support it, and there will be a clear and seamless developmental pathway available to all children from birth to four years of age, which will provide a vital basis for the foundation stage of the Northern Ireland curriculum. To deliver on those outcomes, our recommended actions include more support for preterm babies, because we know that the health and educational outcomes for preterm children are not always as positive as they are for their peers; a review of Sure Start staffing to ensure access to the appropriate health professionals; a development programme for all two-year-olds who are at risk of poor educational outcomes; standardising the length of the preschool day; and an adequately resourced and supported early years workforce. Those are just some of the 13 actions in that important policy area. The investment there will be significant, ranging from £6 million initially to almost £50 million per annum within five years.

Key area 2 is championing emotional health and well-being. Change in that area will mean that children and young people will be provided with effective emotional health and well-being support in a more bespoke and timely manner than ever before. There will be a marked improvement in children's attitudes to their own emotional health and well-being. More investment in nurture provision will have a substantially positive impact on schools, pupils and families. The recommended actions include supporting the emotional health and well-being framework and the gradual expansion of nurture groups over the next number of years, reaching up to 100 settings in the longer term. Investment in that area ranges from £2 million to £6 million per annum in the medium to long term.

Key area 3 is ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum and assessment. That key area will provide increased support for teachers in delivering the Northern Ireland curriculum; increased emphasis on a play-based curriculum at foundation stage; more consistent assessment at Key Stages 1 to 3 through the development of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA) new diagnostic tools; the implementation of a Northern Ireland system evaluation framework, which will help to overcome concerns regarding how data is used and reported; improvements in the 14-19 policy and sixth form policy; and increased investment in digital devices and broadband for specific learners. Those actions represent investment of £2 million in the short term to over £3 million per annum in the longer term.

Key area 4 is promoting a whole-community approach to education. You will be aware of the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. That theme was apparent throughout our work. For that reason, that area will provide seamless pathways from early years to young adulthood, bespoke to the area in which children live. Families will be more involved in their children's learning. The development of strategic-level programmes with funding to match will provide more certainty for delivery agents. Schools will be encouraged to look at new and innovative methods of curriculum delivery that motivate and encourage learners who are at risk of underachievement. Actions include a review of free school meals as a measure of deprivation; a new £10 million per annum reducing educational disadvantage (RED) programme, which requires communities and schools to work together using a place-based approach; and the development of effective collaborative models for curriculum delivery across school and youth settings.

Key area 5 is maximising boys' potential. Factors that concern educators of boys include academic attainment; a lack of interest in studying; higher incidence of behavioural issues, bullying and exclusion; fewer accessing higher education; and increased mental health and anxiety issues. We acknowledge that a number of those factors can also be a concern for girls. We have outlined eight actions that will make a significant difference to educating boys and supporting their learning. Those include developing an educating and engaging boys toolkit; developing effective practice for teachers' professional learning around understanding boys; facilitating access to high-quality restorative practice in schools; and funding collaboration between statutory and voluntary youth services in schools in the most disadvantaged Protestant working-class areas. Investment in those areas grows from £800,000 per annum to £1.5 million per annum within five years.

Key areas 6 and 7 are driving forward teachers' professional learning and supporting the professional learning and well-being of school leadership. Those two areas are critical to the delivery of the 47 actions in our action plan. We, as a panel, felt that it was important to highlight the central role that is played by school teachers and school leaders in addressing educational underachievement, as well as the role of school leaders and the fact that they need more support in developing to become a school leader and after their appointment as school leaders. Actions include investment of £500,000 per annum in high-quality teacher professional learning frameworks; £500,000 to build leadership capacity at all levels; new professional qualifications for leadership; additional investment in the Irish-medium sector of £500,000 per year; and a call for employing authorities to work with governing bodies to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the recruitment and selection of school principals.

Finally, key area 8 is ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery. We, as a panel, felt that the action plan must be monitored at the highest level of government, involving the First Minister and deputy First Minister, thereby requiring all relevant Departments to report in a complete, timely and accurate manner on its outworkings.

In conclusion, the actions that are set out in 'A Fair Start' are capable of making a significant and long-lasting impact on children's learning now and for the foreseeable future. However, that can be achieved only if we invest appropriately and significantly in education for the long term, hence the relevance to today's discussion. As a panel, we fully recognise the magnitude of the challenge in addressing the underlying causes of social disadvantage, the intractability of many of the issues facing families living in disadvantaged circumstances and the need for systemic change in education, which is to be considered by the recently appointed independent review of education. We are convinced that the impact of the actions proposed in our action plan will be significant: promoting equity; fostering greater collaboration between schools, families and communities; closing the attainment gap; and giving all our children and young people a fair start. We are happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** OK. Thank you very much indeed. Before we start, can I confirm that you can still hear me OK?

**Dr Purdy:** Yes, we can hear you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** I thank all five of you for the considerable effort and time that have gone into the report. It is a hugely important piece of work and was delivered on time, of which we are all hugely appreciative.

Giving our young people a fair start is hugely important. We hear much about levelling up. In my view, the absolute beginning of levelling up is giving young people a fair start. I am proud to come from, and

am privileged to represent, a community that is hugely affected by the issues on which your report makes recommendations. Indeed, earlier today, the Deputy Chairman Mr Beggs, Mr Muir and I visited the Belfast Boys' Model School to hear at first hand the challenges that Mrs Montgomery and her team face there. Those challenges are absolutely being addressed in the most appropriate way. We will perhaps hear more about that as we go forward. I am aware that all of you are acutely aware of those challenges because of your expertise and experience. That is why Mr Weir, who was the Minister at the time, asked you to serve on the group. Thank you all very much for your efforts in producing the report.

For me, one of the key things is that there are lots of reports on the issue and probably lots of shelves somewhere bowing from the weight of those reports. The issue needed to be tackled long before now. On the outputs and outcomes, it is critical that the 47 recommendations, which will cost something like £187 million over the five-year period, be delivered. I will start off the questions, and then I will bring in colleagues. How do we make sure that what you want to see, what we want to see and, I have no doubt, what your colleagues across education want to see is delivered in reality and is not just something in a report?

**Dr Purdy:** First, we completely agree with your sentiment, Chair. When we were appointed, there was quite a lot of criticism of the establishment of yet another group to look at educational underachievement. We ourselves were committed to producing a report that brings change. That was a thread that ran through all our deliberations, meetings and engagements. Indeed, we heard that from many of the teachers, parents and community workers with whom we engaged throughout the year.

The difference between this and previous reports is, first, its status, in that it was established through New Decade, New Approach, and we were appointed by a Minister. There was therefore cross-party endorsement for the idea of having an expert panel in the first place. Secondly — this was one of our biggest challenges — we were asked to produce not just a report with some broad sweeping recommendations, of which, as you know, we have had some in the past, but a costed action plan that was split up over the first five or six years of the implementation phase. That, I assure you, was a much more challenging task for the panel. It took many hours of deliberation and negotiation, as well as costings from government officials, to try to produce something that was feasible, was capable of being implemented and was specific enough, using those SMART targets, that it could be delivered on the ground. Too many previous reports made recommendations that, I think, were well-intended but often very broad and sweeping. Our report was different in that regard. Finally, it is different because we recommended an implementation phase and a body to oversee and monitor the implementation. We were adamant about that from the start. We spent many hours considering the best method to ensure the implementation, monitoring and evaluation. What we have come up with in the monitoring by the implementation committee, chaired by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, should ensure that the actions turn into reality. I will open it up to my colleagues to come in as well.

**Mr Jackie Redpath (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement):** I support what Noel has said. There are two critical factors in making this happen. One is the will to make it happen, and the second is the finance to do so. On both counts, the final chapter of this, which is about interdepartmental working, is a critical issue. It is not our view, ethically or financially, that the Department of Education can do this on its own. That is because children do not live their lives in neat departments. They live their lives in many different contexts.

It may sound counter-intuitive, but our view is that you will not effectively address underachievement by focusing solely on underachievement as measured by exams. There has to be a whole-child approach in all the contexts in which children live their lives. If you take that into departmental responsibilities, children's lives run across Education, Health, Communities and other Departments. They also live their lives not only in school but at home, in the streets and in their communities and clubs. We need to rally and bring together authentic partnerships around children for greater collective impact. Critically, those will involve schools but will also involve those who deal with all the contexts in which children live their lives. The finance and the drive for this needs to come from across Departments, and, as Noel said, it needs to be led by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Otherwise, we fear that it would be constrained solely to the Department of Education's remit.

**Ms Kathleen O'Hare (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement):** I have the same fears as you, William, about reports staying on shelves. We are entering a pre-election period. I would like to see 'A Fair Start' high on the agenda in the election manifestos, I would like to see a firm commitment — the same commitment that was given in the Northern Ireland Assembly by all the political parties. In

your constituencies, every one of you has a section of young people who are underachieving. If we are to build the new Northern Ireland that we all want, post pandemic, we want all our children to succeed. We want them all to be able to apply for the jobs that will be very necessary in society, post pandemic. The only way to do that is to make sure that we have what you said, William — a levelling up of our society so that all children, regardless of where they come from or what religion they are, can play a huge part in our society. There is a £180 million price tag, but I would say that, from my experience in Derry and in Belfast, it is a price worth paying. It is cost-effective in order to have the society that we all aspire to.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** OK. One of the things that came up this morning when we visited Belfast Boys' Model School — it is a view that the Committee has established over a number of inquiries, not least with the inquiry into the Civil Service — is the failure of government in Northern Ireland to cut across governance in Departments. We need to jettison the silo approach that some in the Civil Service have had and ensure that that joined-upness and that agility in government is there. What Jackie said is absolutely right: the Department of Education will not be able to fund or address these issues on its own. There needs to be a joined-upness across government, and I do not just mean regional government; I mean local government as well and those bodies and agencies that are funded to work alongside government on these issues. Early intervention is more cost-effective and more effective, not just for education but for health, the judicial and penal system and so on. We need to learn from that in government. At this stage, I will houl my whisht and bring in other members.

**Mr Boylan:** I welcome the panel and commend the report. I want to start off on implementation, and I want to break it down into three tiers. A number of years ago, we introduced an autism strategy and an action plan, and we identified all the roles and responsibilities. I am wondering about your experience of the report and what have you learned. In terms of implementation, could you expand a wee bit on these three points? The first one is this: will you have a role in the implementation, and how do you see it being implemented? The second one is about the time frame, and the third one is about the funding package to deliver that. I want to ask about those three tiers of that one element, please.

**Dr Purdy:** I will start off on that. You asked about our remit as an expert panel. As the Chair said at the start, we were appointed and invited to produce a report, which we produced on time, against all the odds during a pandemic, and it was published on 1 June. Our formal role in the process has ended, but that does not mean that our commitment to the implementation of our actions has ended — far from it. As a panel, we remain 100% committed to seeing the actions put into practice, even though our formal role in that process has ended. That, I suppose, is even more of a justification for us setting up the monitoring and evaluation structures so carefully in the action plan, because we knew that our formal role would end on 31 May or 1 June. Our formal role has ended, but our commitment to the implementation has certainly not ended.

You asked about the time frame. Some elements of our action plan are relatively straightforward to implement, and some things have already been implemented. I know that you had a briefing from the permanent secretary and a senior official a couple of weeks ago, so you have heard about some of the things — we have also heard it — that have been implemented. Some of the other things — for example, the reducing educational disadvantage programme — will take time to establish. We understand that a stakeholder group has been set up for that. A lot of the actions that we have put forward rest on co-creation, partnership and the establishment of authentic relationships between communities and government, and that kind of thing takes time. While, of course, we want to see everything expedited and become reality as quickly as possible, we are aware that some of this takes time to establish.

You asked about the funding. Yes, £180 million was, I think, the headline that the BBC put out last June. That is the total over four or five years. The maximum amount per year, I think, is £73 million, and that is really when everything is up and running after three, four or five years. In the initial stages, it is actually much less than that. We understand that maybe £4 million or £5 million has been set aside during this financial year, and that ramps up to a few more million in the second year. It is a gradual increase as the programmes become established through partnership and through collaborative approaches.

**Mr Boylan:** I am interested in key area 8: interdepartmental working. Those of us who have been here for a number of years have seen Departments operate in silos. I have a keen interest in your point about the Children's Services Co-operation Act. There are question marks over whether that is on delivery or not. How do we cross that boundary in ensuring that we can deliver on all those Executive policies using what you brought forward?

**Dr Purdy:** We understand the challenges that Departments face in collaborating. We understand that progress has been made in that regard. We heard from many government officials that interdepartmental collaboration improved during the COVID pandemic. We hope that that will be built on.

We heard, of course, about the Children's Services Co-operation Act. We are keen for that to be brought into play. We can only hope that the structure of the implementation board and the biannual reporting on that by government officials will ensure that that collaboration continues post COVID and that our actions are turned into reality.

**Mr Boylan:** OK. Thank you very much.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you very much for your detailed report. There are very good ideas in there.

There are significantly higher levels of absenteeism in many TSN wards, and young people who are not attending school will not reach their full potential. A number of aspects in your report would help to address that. You refer to better community and parental linkage and the importance of emotional health and well-being.

At the Boys' Model this morning, we saw a year 8 well-being class, which, I understand, happens weekly, that helps to develop resilience, coping mechanisms and life skills. I am shocked that that does not happen in every school. There are citizenship classes, for instance, where you can add things, but, until recently, mental health and well-being has been steered away from. Have you developed a view on well-being classes for every child?

**Ms Mary Montgomery (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement):** Roy, I will come in on that question, because I was beside you doing the equivalent of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" at the well-being class this morning.

I absolutely agree that well-being needs to be a consideration across every school in Northern Ireland. COVID shone a light brightly on the need for resources to be invested in well-being. Our report takes cognisance of the fact that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are predisposed to increased levels of mental ill health and difficulties with emotional regulation and so on.

When we were looking at this from the point of view of our research and producing our report, the Education Authority's (EA) emotional health and well-being framework and subsequent strategy were well developed. We have confidence in it, so we did not spell out specifics in the report as to what should be done for emotional health and well-being. However, we have faith in the EA strategy that is being rolled out.

In addition to that, CCEA has introduced a well-being hub, and it provides resources to schools through that mechanism. That is a well-resourced hub. However, CCEA and the EA have produced those resources in a response to COVID as opposed to that having come from a desire to tackle social disadvantage.

**Ms Joyce Logue (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement):** I work in the primary sector. While it is not mandatory for every school to focus lessons on well-being, COVID has ensured that every school is focusing on it. Our report took cognisance of that. We listened to a lot of leaders, and they had great examples of well-being in schools. In our report, we promote more nurture units. I am from a school in which 66% of pupils get a free school meal, and that figure is climbing. We do not have a nurture unit, but we have used the TSN fund to set up and fund a nurture room in our school. I know that many other schools are doing that. If our report is implemented and we get funding for nurture, it will address many aspects of well-being, which in turn will lead to better results and outcomes for our children as they progress through the education system.

**Mr Beggs:** To go back to TSN funding, this morning, we were given illustrations of how TSN funding was spent at the Boys' Model and the positive effect that it is having on outcomes, with improved attainment levels. As there is relatively little reporting on how TSN funding is being used and, therefore, little guidance as to where it works well and where it does not, is there any reason that everyone is not asked simply to advise on how they spend TSN funding in order that everyone can learn?

**Ms Logue:** I will comment as a principal. TSN reporting came in 2018. It was not mandatory. Many schools did not report. As you say, 6% of schools reported in 2018-19. Of course, there is a balance. The workload of school leaders is incredibly heavy. In our report, we recommend that it become mandatory and we are aware of the difficulties of that. This year, as a school leader, I have seen a change in TSN reporting. I know that many of my colleagues will be reporting on TSN because DE sent out more guidance on it, it was much clearer and more letters were sent out to remind people to report on it. Therefore, I hope that this year, following our report, there will be more reporting on TSN. I am not sure that reporting will be 100%, but there will be an increase.

**Ms Montgomery:** I will just supplement what Joyce said. There is a difficulty with TSN funding because school budgets have been under such pressure. They have been running at a 12.5% shortfall over the past 10 years. School leaders are forced to find the money where they can, so there is a reluctance to fill in planners and do all those additional jobs when the budget itself is so tight and under so much pressure. However, there is absolutely an appetite, as Joyce said, to fill in the TSN planner now. It has a much higher profile in people's minds because of the use of the Engage planner. Engage money, which is much less, has come into schools with the caveat that you do not get it unless you complete the planner.

**Ms Logue:** The Engage planner is very similar to the TSN one so that, if people have filled out the Engage planner, it is very straightforward to fill out the TSN one. COVID and the Engage fund have helped and, hopefully, that will have implications for the TSN planners being filled out.

**Mr Beggs:** I will ask a final question. Sizeable additional funding is available through SEN, which follows the statementing of pupils. I wonder how this can all work together. I have previously raised this point: it was reported to me that there were up to three classroom assistants standing at the back of a post-primary classroom, unable to intervene or do anything. They just stand there. Does the panel agree that schools should be given greater flexibility to maximise the use of that funding in order to benefit young people?

**Ms Logue:** Without a doubt. I have a classroom at present with four — almost five — classroom assistants and over 30 children in it. I would much rather have that money to allow me to decide what is in the best interests of the children to whom that money is allocated. I could allocate that after deciding on the best outcomes on the ground for those children.

**Ms O'Hare:** Roy, you have hit the nail on the head [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] funding. It needs to be considered. There was an initiative a number of years ago involving the Boys' Model and Hazelwood. There was greater flexibility of funding to the schools. We were able to employ and redeploy classroom assistants and additional specialist teachers. Mary can probably say more about that.

**Ms Montgomery:** I spoke about it this morning. I explained that it was quite a struggle. It is an annual struggle with the Education Authority to obtain what we call a package of support, as opposed to just an endless number of classroom assistants. That flexibility to respond to the needs of your pupils in a way that you understand and see as the best fit is vital. Joyce and I spoke about it earlier. I have the flexibility to do what I see as fitting best, whereas Joyce is very much in the silo of giving the children more classroom assistants.

**Mr Beggs:** I am shocked to hear that there can be four or five classroom assistants standing at the back of classrooms.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you, everyone, for joining us remotely. We are hearing quite a lot of acronyms around funding. We have TSN, Engage and SEN funding. I am sure that there are other pots with different criteria, reporting and requirements. Is it now time to review all the funding streams to see whether there is a way in which to harmonise the funding to schools to ensure that it goes to where it is required? There is a myriad of administration, management and reporting around the funding that comes through from different streams.

**Ms Logue:** You are right: there is a myriad of funding. It is very time-consuming. We must be accountable for all the funding that we get. It is important that it is streamlined and that we can allocate the money at school level to where it is most needed: the pupils who are most in need.

**Ms O'Hare:** That myriad of funding has to be additional funding and not be in place of the normal school budget. It was very prominent in the news last week that pupils in Northern Ireland are funded more poorly than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. I assume that that is a matter of great concern for the PAC and Members of the Assembly.

**Dr Purdy:** It is a good question. It highlights the need for more joined-up thinking by government in terms of the funding streams that are coming in to schools and the reporting mechanisms, many of which are very different from each other. If there were any scope for collaboration in the Department around how money is distributed and reported, or if the systems could be cohered, which would make life easier for very busy school principals, that would be welcomed by all.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you for that. We are very good in Northern Ireland at creating lots of initiatives and reports, but we do not take the time to step back and say, "Where are we? How can we streamline this?". Today, I saw TSN funding being used in a very targeted fashion, but some of it was being used for mental health, which you would consider, traditionally, to be in the remit of Health. There is a need for collaboration. There is a real issue in Northern Ireland with how our government is structured; it incentivises Departments not to work together. There is no legal requirement for them to work together, which has an impact on people.

Before we left the school this morning, we visited the class on emotional resilience and well-being. What I saw there was a class of well-turned-out boys, engaging in the activities with staff and external people who had come in and were actively building a rapport with the young boys. It was really inspiring to see that. One thing that I am conscious of is that those young boys arrive into school at around 9.00 am, then leave later in the day and go back into the community. The school is part of the community. To me, those relationships with the community are key to ensuring that their experience is 365 days a year, 24/7, and supports them to reach their fullest potential.

What challenges are there to engaging with local communities to help to achieve what you are trying to achieve? I have seen examples where that can occur, but where are the challenges and what more do we need to do to help you, as the education community, to build better relationships with communities?

**Ms Montgomery:** Jackie is our expert on community, but, from a school point of view, engaging with the community is essential. Schools can tap into a great deal of expertise and resource in the community that is funded in different ways. However, it goes back to my earlier point. I was trained as a history teacher. There was little training for me as a school leader, and there is certainly no training for me in how to deal with problems that are the result of social disadvantage. Our report very much looks at preparing school leaders to tackle problems properly in the context in which they find themselves. In that context of social disadvantage, community — involvement with the community and a wrap-around approach — is gold. You are right to point out that children are in school only from 9.00 am to 3.20 pm. In the evenings and at weekends, many social problems wrap around those children and their families, and there needs to be connectivity with the community in order to address that.

**Mr Redpath:** Your questions and comments are breaking up a little, so I am sort of interpreting what you said. I hope that I answer you properly.

Following on from what Mary said, one of the very early figures that we were given by the Department of Education was that a child between the ages of four and 18 spends only 13% of their waking hours in school. Therefore, 87% of a child's life is spent in other contexts; much of it at home, in youth clubs, in uniformed organisations, in the street or wherever. Unless we get all those contexts working together, especially for children who carry issues and are disadvantaged, we will not achieve that. Schools cannot do the job on their own. Obviously, they have a massive role to play, but we need to bring together, in an authentic partnership, all those contexts in which children live their lives and get collective action around agreed goals. That requires partnership working.

There is an issue about resources in the community — for example, in youth work, which is a vital support to that, and other fields. That is something to look at. That is why it needs to go right across Departments. We need Departments to cohere with their efforts. Those of us who are on the ground must also cohere with our efforts. It can be done by what we call the place-based approach, because underachievement largely manifests in particular places and communities, and it is possible to identify them. In rural areas, it is more dispersed. That requires a different approach. In urban areas and towns, it manifests clearly in certain places. That is where we need to go to cohere with that partnership approach.

From a community perspective, where you get that partnership, you are talking about a backbone organisation leading it, which may well be a school but could be a voluntary or community organisation. Regardless of whoever leads on that authentic partnership, for all the partners, there must be agreed outcomes and an agreed approach. That approach can break the back of the issue, and it can break it over the length of time that we projected, which is five years.

**Ms O'Hare:** From working in north Belfast and Derry, it is obvious that, when communities work with and in partnership with schools, it can really make a big difference in addressing underachievement and disadvantage. The first part of our report deals with communities, community mentors and community leadership, but that needs to happen at all levels in all communities, both urban and rural. That is a particular challenge for us.

**Mr Muir:** I have one last brief question. One of the things that could and should be a bridge between schools and the community are boards of governors. Governors are meant to be representative of the community. In your experience, are boards of governors being used to their fullest potential to bridge those relationships with the community?

**Dr Purdy:** I am afraid that I did not catch that. Will you ask it again, Andrew?

**Mr Muir:** Yes. It was whether boards of governors are being fully used for their relationships with communities.

**Ms O'Hare:** I would say that it depends on the particular school and whether you are used. Boards of governors are great on-tap resources in our schools. In the report, we point to the need for training, more training and more targeted training for school governance. Many of our schools have very good governors, but there is an issue with the recruitment of governors and the fast recruitment of governors. You could send names into the Department, and, six months later, those people would not be approved as voting members of boards of governors. That is an issue for us in school governance throughout Northern Ireland.

**Ms Logue:** I am in a school, and I know that our local schools have proactively sought governor members from the community, because of the wealth of experience that they can bring and the links that they can make to improving outcomes for children in schools. However, as Kathleen said, there is a lot of work to be done in the recruitment and training of governors. That is outlined in our report.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** If you do not mind, I have a few questions about your recommendations. You may be aware that the Committee carried out a significant inquiry into special educational needs at the start of the year, and we hope to have the chief executive of the Education Authority in front of us in early December to see how it is implementing many of our recommendations.

How will SEN be factored in to the action plan? Early intervention is critical as money is a limited resource intervention. It is also critical for children, families, classrooms, teachers, classroom assistants and so on.

**Dr Purdy:** Again, your line broke up a little bit, but I think that you asked a question about SEN and its importance in the report. SEN is, of course, crucial in education and educational underachievement. We refer to SEN in the report, particularly in key area 1, which deals with early years. We heard from many stakeholders in early years about the importance of the early identification and assessment of children who are being missed, either in the 0-3 age group before they come into the preschool year or even during that preschool year. Some of our recommendations in key area 1 are precisely about developing and investing in assessment, intervention and support services for younger children with developmental delay, which might indicate a special educational need. We also recommend that the early years SEN inclusion service be expanded and enhanced. It is not that we turned our attention away from SEN — far from it. As an SEN lecturer at Stranmillis, I believe that the key element is early identification and assessment.

We are also aware — we were made aware in our meetings with the Education Authority — that significant reviews and reforms are under way by the Education Authority. In the report commentary, we note that we wish to see that review and the recommendations of Northern Ireland Audit Office reviews acted on as quickly as possible. We were encouraged by what we heard, but school leaders

around the panel certainly encouraged the Education Authority to deliver on its promises to improve services for children and young people.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** When it comes to targeting social need, we heard from Mary this morning that the Belfast Boys' Model School, which has, I think, 1,079 pupils, receives £350,000. That equates to slightly over £324 per pupil. Yesterday, Gary Fair gave the news to the Education Committee that the amount of £350 million is needed. Michelle McIlveen asked the Finance Minister for an extra £80 million but was allocated £20 million. Kathleen was quite right about manifestos: talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy whisky. We need to ensure that politicians deliver on this issue. Not only is providing that money so important for the individual child, their family and our communities but it is good for Northern Ireland plc.

It is important that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister buy into that. In the inquiry and in our report, we will play our role, as best as we can, to ensure that the joined-upness that is so needed happens. If that joined-upness is not there, we will not be able to achieve what you want to achieve. Collectively, we fully endorse the 47 recommendations, and our parties endorsed them in the Assembly. I do not think that any of us is our party's spokesperson for education. Nevertheless, we all represent constituencies, and many of us sit on boards of governors and are fathers or grandfathers. It is hugely important that that verbalisation is supported by pounds, shillings and pence in order to deliver that.

Jackie made the point that the will and the finance need to be there, and he is absolutely right. I will throw in a third thing: leadership. I will not mention any schools or names, but I have sat on boards of governors or been aware of schools in my constituency in which leadership has been better than in others. Ms O'Hare and Ms Montgomery are two excellent leaders who have served in excellent schools in north Belfast and made a vital difference. Mary continues to do so at the school, and Kathleen does so in other fields. That leadership is crucial, and, if we do not have that leadership, no matter how much will or money is there, it will not happen, and we will not see the change that we need. How can we make sure that the leadership is there? Can that be done? Governors have a role, but, in reality, even that is limited. I have seen that from my experience.

**Ms O'Hare:** I will kick off on this. I had the privilege of leading schools in Northern Ireland for 16 years. I was very fortunate that, when I started off as a leader, there was a professional qualification for headship. There is no such qualification now, and that is a real difficulty. That qualification inspired people to become a head teacher. When I first applied for my job, there were about 18 candidates. Now, very few people are applying to be leaders in schools. We need to address that, and the report points to that. We need to have training for head teachers. We need well-being support for head teachers, for those horrible days when something happens. Throughout my career, I experienced the death of students and colleagues. There were just bad days because of what was happening out in the community.

There needs to be training and support for leadership, and we also need a more consistent approach to the appointment of leadership positions in our schools. You are a leader of a particular type of school. Boards of governors need training in the appointment of a leader for their area. We all know situations where head teachers have been appointed to positions in schools. Though they may have been wonderful leaders, they were not right for that area. You need to fit into the area where you are appointed.

The recommendations in our report go back to the importance of inspiring leadership, training for leadership and then, for those who have been in it for some time, sustaining leadership in schools. When I left in 2018, quite a number of my colleagues left as well. That was, because of the situation in schools, very much about not waiting for retirement age. The support that is needed for leadership in schools needs to be recognised.

**Dr Purdy:** It is fair to add that, during the past year, we met a very large number of truly inspirational school leaders. I am not talking just about the three inspirational school leaders with whom I work on the panel. We met a large number of fantastic principals. One of the things that struck me was that they were inspirational and successful principals despite the system, not because of it, and despite a lack of training, support or guidance being made available, not because of it. As someone who is not a school principal, that really struck me, and it fed into the recommendations and actions that we have put forward. We need to address that issue and provide greater consistency so that, in challenging circumstances, all our school leaders can be supported, guided, encouraged and even challenged to be more effective leaders.

**Ms Logue:** In recent times, the Education Authority has been providing more courses to train up would-be leaders, such as steps to leadership and pathways to leadership. It is also providing courses for leaders under Achieve, which is a Leadership Matters programme. The EA is encouraging leaders to apply to the Association of Education Advisers. Things are being addressed, and we have encouraged that through the 'A Fair Start' programme. It is essential that it is addressed. As Kathleen said, the number of applicants for headships is decreasing rapidly.

**Mr Hilditch:** You are very welcome this afternoon, folks. I have a few questions, the first of which is about social deprivation. What do laypersons see as social deprivation? Is it where the school is or where pupils live? Are you happy with free school meals as the education system's identifier of social deprivation?

**Dr Purdy:** One of the actions that we have put forward, David, is that the Department of Education fund a review of the free school meals proxy measure for social or income disadvantage. That is not because we are convinced that there is necessarily a better alternative. It is simply because it is used so universally as a measure and as the threshold for access to additional funding. It has been a long time since that was reviewed.

We are aware that, in other parts of the UK, there are slight variations on the free school meals measure: for example, where it includes children who have ever been on a free school meals register rather than just those who are currently on it. We are also aware that there is a cliff edge approach to free school meals funding. Those who just pass the threshold get the funding while those who miss it by a few pounds do not receive it at all, and there might be other approaches to that. Another approach, of course, is to look at the geographical area, the multiple deprivation indexes and so on. That approach also has shortcomings, but we have asked the Department to lead a review, just to make sure that that measure is still the most appropriate. Personally, I am not convinced that there are many better alternatives, but it is important that the Department look at it again to make sure that it is still fit for purpose.

**Mr Hilditch:** I have a question on the fabric of schools and their physical facilities. When I look schools in my constituency, I see window frames falling out, buckets in corridors and various other things. Where the fabric of a school is not good, do you see a link to a lack of pupil confidence and enthusiasm, and, indeed, to absenteeism?

**Dr Purdy:** You will have to repeat that from closer to the mic, David. We did not catch it at all.

**Mr Hilditch:** I was commenting on the fabric of schools and their physical facilities. Do you see a link between a lack of pupil confidence and enthusiasm or, indeed, absenteeism and the state of facilities that pupils are taught in not being good enough?

**Ms O'Hare:** David, having started my career as a principal in a school that had concrete cancer and having ended it in a school that had a £20 million new build, my answer is yes, yes and yes. The infrastructure of the school, particularly in areas of disadvantage, is key. It tells pupils how you value them. If you bring them into poor buildings, you are saying, "This is how much we value you." That is not to say that fantastic work has not been done in schools that are falling down.

People from the Department talked to us about infrastructure. Many of our schools have been built with success in mind. In the build that I was involved in, I was lucky enough to look at school buildings in other parts of the world. I could see how they were built to build success, confidence and self-esteem. If you ever visit St Cecilia's College in Derry, you will have that very much in mind when you walk through the door. The commitment to the infrastructure of schools is key.

To be honest, we looked at the primary estate, not so much the post-primary estate, and I have to say that, particularly in areas of the Shankill, there needs to be a rethink about how infrastructure communicates to the community how it is valued.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thank you. Have you introduced any international best practice in the report?

**Dr Purdy:** Much of the evidence that we gathered was on an international basis. Take, for instance, the Heckman curve that we talk about in key area 1, which is around investment in the early years. That is based on an international model and evidence from other countries across the world. In a way, we have fallen behind many other countries. Other countries have invested more heavily in the early

years, and they have been doing that for a period. Our report recommends that we catch up on some of the other countries that have recognised the importance of the early years of 0-3; not just the statutory school age, which is three or four. They invest heavily in the 0-3 age group. As we prove in the commentary in our report, that investment in early years brings huge dividends further down the line.

**Mr Redpath:** If we caught the question correctly, that whole area of early years has the greatest emphasis in our report. The returns from that will be massive. There is a need to create a seamless pathway for a child, from before birth right through those early years and the early school years. That path should be seamless, and support should be available at every stage, especially for children in disadvantaged areas.

For me, one of the gems that we have is our Sure Start programme. The Department of Education is to be commended for investing again this year in, I believe, a 6% rise in the Sure Start budget. That is good. Sure Start was lost in England, and we have retained it. Nevertheless, it is important that Sure Start has the capacity to deliver on what it needs to deliver, as well as, by the way, in all the other settings, including, in particular, day care for young children and babies.

One of the biggest things that could be done — this is one of the actions in the report — is to expand the programme for two-year-olds that exists only in a limited way at the moment. That should be expanded with a targeted developmental programme for two-year-olds. Nursery-school principals tell us that they can tell whether a child coming into the nursery school has benefited from the programme for two-year-olds. From my point of view, one of the single biggest, achievable things that we could do would be to expand that programme in early years.

**Dr Purdy:** I have one final point. We had a fruitful session with officials from the Republic of Ireland. Unfortunately, given our very compressed time frame, we were not able to spend more time with them. I strongly encourage officials here to look south of the border at the delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) system. They have some really innovative and well-evaluated interventions there: we mentioned, for example, the home school community liaison officers. We do not go as far as mandating that, because we want a place-based partnership approach, but officials should look at a number of the elements happening south of the border and, indeed, in other parts of the UK. We met officials from Scotland, Wales and England. I strongly encourage officials working in the implementation phase to continue and develop those links and to learn from best practice, as the question suggests, not just in the UK but further afield.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thank you. Finally, I go back to where we started: the potential for reports to gather dust on shelves. Is there a future role for the panel, or is your work finished? Is there potential value in your having a monitoring role?

**Dr Purdy:** That is a difficult question for us to answer. As I said at the start, our formal role has finished. The panel was established to produce a report, and our commitment remains to that. Our formal role has officially ended. That is not to say that we would be opposed to any future involvement, time permitting. However, our official role finished on 1 June with the publication of the report.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** Thank you. I return to the issue of collaboration, which is mentioned in the report. Kathleen, Mary and Jackie will be aware of the suicide awareness and mental health initiative (SAMHI), which is now the suicide health information networking education (SHINE) forum, in the greater Shankill. That is a voluntary coming together of professionals, including the Greater Shankill Partnership's integrated services, Extern, politicians, leaders from the main schools, uniformed organisations, the police, government agencies, voluntary agencies and so on. There is no budget, and there is no money. It is about coming together, under an umbrella organisation, to share information, engage and provide a support structure and mechanism for people to talk about that. Kathleen and Mary have attended those meetings in the past. That sort of thing, which happened not because government pushed it but because people came together, is a useful pilot for the sharing of information, because you have the professionals and teachers there. There are ongoing pressures. For example, some primary-school principals have, unfortunately, reported young people needing professional help and counselling.

The reason why I mentioned that is: over the years, the forum has found that — I made this point this morning, and I have made it in the Education Committee and in this Committee — too often, schools

have to use front-line education money to buy in professional help. A greater joined-upness has to come out of the report to ensure that the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Department for Communities and so on step up to the plate and help to address those issues. Schools cannot address those issues themselves. They are societal and require a multi-agency approach. That also includes parental help, support and guidance, if it is there. Sadly, in many homes, it is not, but it is there in churches, uniformed organisations, youth organisations and so on. That sort of collaborative approach was adopted in the greater Shankill area. There is also Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues (TAMHI), which operates in another part of north Belfast and gives great leadership.

No other members have signalled that they want to ask a question. I thank you all very much for your time this afternoon, for your dedication and commitment during your time working on the report and for the production of an excellent report, which, as I said earlier, was on time. It is now up to all of us to make sure that the 47 recommendations are put in place for the benefit of our young people and that the money is found to ensure that that happens. Thank you very much, indeed, Dr Purdy, Jackie, Kathleen, Mary and Ms —

**Ms Logue:** Joyce.

**The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey):** Joyce. I was going to call you by your surname. I could not quite recall your Christian name.

Thank you all very much. Your input and report are invaluable. It is important that we see the report as a key part of our inquiry. We will make sure that it is. Thank you.

**Ms O'Hare:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your support.