



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into 'Closing the Gap – Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment': Department of Education; Education Authority

2 December 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr William Humphrey (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Ms Órlaithí Flynn
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Cara Hunter
Mr William Irwin
Mr Maolíosa McHugh
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Dr Mark Browne	Department of Education
Ms Alison Chambers	Department of Education
Mrs Linda Drysdale	Department of Education
Dr Suzanne Kingon	Department of Education
Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Patricia Cooney	Education Authority
Ms Michele Corkey	Education Authority
Ms Sara Long	Education Authority
Mr Andrew Allen	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr Rodney Allen	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr Patrick Barr	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr Kyle Bingham	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr Kieran Donnelly	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I invite Dr Mark Browne, the accounting officer at the Department of Education, and Ms Sara Long, the chief executive of the Education Authority (EA), to join the meeting. In addition, joining the meeting by StarLeaf are, from the Department of Education, Alison Chambers, director of promoting collaboration and tackling disadvantage, Suzanne Kingon, head of school improvement, and Linda Drysdale, head of early years, and, from the Education Authority, Michele Corkey, director of education, and Patricia Cooney, assistant director of education.

Good afternoon. You are all very welcome. Dr Browne or Ms Long, do you want to make an opening statement before we move to questions? Mark, you go first.

Dr Mark Browne (Department of Education): Thank you very much, Chair. Good afternoon to you and the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to talk further about this important report on social deprivation and links to educational attainment.

In your invitation letter of 19 October, you said that the Committee noted the Department's observations on the general improvement in attainment and that the Department recognised that more needs to be done. You said that you would like to explore in greater detail the evidence that supports how the Department intends to close the gap in attainment for the most socially deprived areas and that, to that end, the identification of good practice is of particular interest to the Committee. You also said that it would be beneficial to take evidence from the Education Authority, and Sara and her colleagues are therefore in attendance.

As I emphasised at our previous session, I assure the Committee that the prime purpose of the Department of Education and the Education Authority is to seek to ensure that every child is able to fulfil their potential. It is important for our society, economy and future that that opportunity is afforded to every child, regardless of their circumstances.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report highlights at paragraph 3.19:

"the educational attainment of all school leavers has increased greatly over the over the period".

From 2006 to 2019, the proportion of all school-leavers achieving five plus GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and maths, increased by 18 percentage points, from 53% to 71%. Over that same period, the proportion of children entitled to free school meals achieving the same significant benchmark increased by an even larger margin of 24 percentage points, from 26% in 2006 to 50% by 2019. That reduced the gap in attainment between those entitled to free school meals who were leaving school and non-free school meal-entitled (FSME) school-leavers by three percentage points or 10%. Very good progress has been made in increasing attainment, but we recognise that more needs to be done to reduce the differentials between groups.

In seeking to maintain the current rate of improvement in attainment and to reduce differentials further between young people from disadvantaged circumstances and other pupils, the Department will continue to implement its core school improvement policy, which is Every School a Good School. That policy aims to tackle underachievement and to promote the raising of standards and equality in all our schools, enabling every young person to fulfil their potential.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Sorry, excuse me. I ask members to please mute their devices so that we do not have feedback. I mentioned that at the start of the meeting. If you are not speaking, could you mute your device? Thank you.

Dr Browne: Thanks, Chair.

At the core of the policy is self-evaluation, leading to sustained self-improvement, combined with a formal intervention process for those schools where the quality of education provision is less than satisfactory. DE's school improvement policy focuses on promoting the factors that local and international evidence tells us are the core characteristics of a good school. It aims to support school leaders, boards of governors and teachers in implementing good practice in their schools to address any barriers to learning that pupils might face and, therefore, to improve the outcomes of all pupils. The policy is centred on six key areas: effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement; high-quality teaching and learning; tackling barriers to learning; embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment, and of using performance and other information to effect improvement; support to help schools; and increasing engagement between schools, parents, families and communities. The policy highlights that the primary responsibility for school improvement rests with schools themselves, which, through effective and evidence-based self-evaluation and planning through the school development plan process, can develop a high-quality educational experience for all pupils.

Alongside the work of teachers, school leaders, boards of governors and managing authorities, inspection is a critical component of school improvement. Inspection highlights specific areas for improvement and identifies those schools where the overall quality of education is found to be less than satisfactory. A key element of the school improvement policy is the follow-up on all published school inspection reports and, in particular, the formal intervention process. In cases where the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports that a school needs to address urgently significant

areas for improvement, the policy requires the school to be placed in the formal intervention process to ensure that it receives focused support from the EA and, in the case of Catholic-maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The EA also has an important role in helping to identify schools that are at risk of underachievement and intervening with appropriate support.

The overarching school improvement policy is supported and supplemented by strategies relating to particular issues of importance, such as the Count, Read: Succeed strategy, which focuses on numeracy and literacy. It is also supplemented and enhanced by specific time-limited or targeted initiatives, such as extended and full service schools; the Delivering Social Change literacy and numeracy signature programme; the promoting improvement in English and maths project; the north Belfast primary principals programme; the Engage programme; and, most recently, the A Fair Start initiative. Those initiatives, in turn, sit alongside other system-level policies, such as the Northern Ireland curriculum; our policy on early years and Sure Start; special educational needs (SEN); and teacher professional development. They are underpinned by the common funding formula and delegated decision-making to schools.

That combination of policies provides the basis on which the Department of Education supports continual school improvement. Real and significant progress has been made since 2006 in improving educational attainment for all pupils, including those in disadvantaged circumstances. As we look to the future, we face significant challenges, most obviously in managing the impact of COVID each day in our schools, and seeking to address the impact that that has had and will continue to have on the well-being and education of our young people, particularly the most disadvantaged in our society. That is compounded by the ongoing financial pressure on the education sector as we face into an imminent Budget settlement, with around £366 million of pressures next year, rising to around £543 million in 2024-25. In that context, maintaining our school improvement policy and delivering on the 'A Fair Start' report will be very challenging. In doing so, we will continue to rely on the commitment, dedication and professionalism of our school principals, teachers and broader education workforce.

Ms Sara Long (Education Authority): Good afternoon. The permanent secretary has provided a comprehensive overview, so I will keep my comments brief. We very much welcome the 'Closing the Gap' report recommendations, as well as the 'A Fair Start' report and other important work that has been carried out in that field to ensure that all young people, regardless of background, are well supported to achieve the highest level possible. Reducing underachievement, addressing the attainment gap, and ensuring that all children and young people have access to supportive and high-quality educational opportunities to give them the best possible start in life is a critical priority for the EA, working alongside DE and all our partners. A lot of effective and impactful work is happening across our schools and in partnership with those sectors more widely. We know that there is more that we can do collectively.

I am joined by my colleagues Michele Corkey and Patricia Cooney, who joined the EA after many years as school leaders. We look forward to outlining, during the session, some best-practice examples, which will very much build the foundations of what we need to do and where we need to go to deliver for all our children and young people.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. Thank you.

As you will have heard, we had a very useful and good visit to the Belfast Boys' Model School. I recommended that the Audit Office visit the Boys' Model. Mr Allen and his team visited the Boys' Model a couple of weeks after we did. Subsequent to that visit, the head of the Civil Service also visited the Boys' Model. My suggestion of visiting the Boys' Model was not because I am a former pupil and it is in north Belfast but because of the excellent leadership of the senior management team in that school and the fantastic results that have been achieved there.

Colleagues will be brought in, in a moment, and can add to this if they wish. During our visit, we were struck by the level of collaboration needed between schools and administrators to target the needs of the individual students. We were hugely impressed by the commitment of the staff there. We got a presentation from the senior management team about the various elements of delivering that. What systems and mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is collaboration and cooperation among the Department, the Education Authority and schools — principals, teachers and governors, in particular — and to ensure that what is needed and what the school has requested is actually delivered?

Dr Browne: I am happy to respond to that in the first instance, Chair. As you know, I was also at the Boys' Model. It seems to get a lot of visits, these days. We can take a lot of learning from the work that is done in that school. It is not just in that school. There are other schools that exemplify very strong practice.

From a departmental perspective, there are a number of ways in which we encourage cooperation and collaboration. A key element of our sustainable schools policy is that the school should be well-rooted in the community. That is one of the key criteria when looking at whether a school is sustainable. A fundamental part of the Every School a Good School policy is that there should be very close connections between the school and parents, between the school and the community and, indeed, between the school and other schools, in order to support peer learning. Part of our school improvement policy is the creation of area-learning communities that provide the opportunity for schools to come together, to share best practice, to talk about the issues that they face and to cooperate and collaborate on a consistent basis for the benefit of their pupils.

We support that in a range of ways in our policies. Certainly, when the inspectorate goes out to visit schools and is looking at school development plans, part of what it will look at are those very aspects: connections with the community, connections with other schools, how teachers learn and develop, how they interact with their peers and how they improve the offer that they have for their children and young people.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Do you want to add anything?

Ms Long: On an operational delivery level, our school development service works very closely with all our school leaders on school development planning, school improvement and any of the strategies that we want to take forward as the Education Authority. We also have an Education Authority school leaders engagement group with over 90 school leaders on it. Through that group, we try to co-design and build those strategies and outworkings with our school leaders, so that we can ensure that what we do is grounded in some of the practical realities for the schools delivering those strategies.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): How often does that group meet?

Ms Long: We have just kicked it off. It will continue to meet on a quarterly basis.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Have you just had one meeting?

Ms Long: Yes. We have had previous forums in the past, and we have our locality leadership team meetings, which have been taking place over the last few weeks, but the focus is on that co-design and on trying to harness and develop that co-design in what we do with our school leaders.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Ms Long, in your opening remarks, you said that there is more that we can do collectively, and I think that all of us share that view. As Chair of this Committee and as a former member of the Education Committee, I have to say that, during our inquiry so far, we have taken the view that this cannot be addressed by the Department of Education, on its own, working with the Education Authority. It needs to very much cut across government. Otherwise, our report will be another report that will sit on a shelf that is bowing with reports, and there will be little or no improvement to young people's lives and education. We met, albeit, sadly, remotely with Dr Purdy and his team, including the principal of the Boys' Model, Mary Montgomery. How can we ensure that the joined-upness that is needed is there, so that we can maximise spend across government to improve education and drive up educational attainment and to ensure that the school experience is much more holistic and produces the young people whom we all want to see at the end of their school life?

Dr Browne: There are a number of levels at which we need to address that problem. At the highest level, it is important that education and the whole issue of attainment, underachievement and the differences in attainment between groups are key elements of the Programme for Government to which the Executive sign up. It is also important, in seeking to deliver the outcome in the Programme for Government that every child has the best start in life, that the various Departments that can make a contribution to that are engaged under that outcome, as they are, and are identifying how they can contribute to the achievement of that outcome.

We work very closely with a range of Departments, and I know that Sara works very closely with a range of bodies. For example, on early years, Sure Start and special educational needs, we work

hand in glove with the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board. We have very close connections with the Department of Justice and with the Department for Communities on the impact of the connections, as you talked about earlier, between the school and the community. We also work with the Department for the Economy on a wide range of fronts, particularly in the 14-19 sphere.

Of course, it is important that we identify the connections between all the strategies that sit below the Programme for Government. For example, we have the 10X Economy strategy, which is the Department for the Economy's strategy. In that, it has identified a number of priority areas that require connections to be made with what is happening in schools and carried through into further education colleges, higher education colleges and so forth and then on into the economy. We work with the Department for the Economy on that to identify how we can best make those connections.

A final example is 'A Fair Start', which sets out quite clearly the importance of collaborative working and sets out very clearly the importance of the reducing educational disadvantage programme and the role of the community in that. We have started some work on what that would look like and how we could identify best practice in order to take that forward. In that report, which was endorsed by the Executive, there is a commitment for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to receive a report twice a year on the progress that is being made. That keeps the whole programme very firmly on the Executive's agenda.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Do you want to add anything, Sara?

Ms Long: No, other than to say that it is important that we collaborate and cooperate at a system level. In fact, it is vital; it is more than important. If we look at some of the examples of good practice on the ground, some of which you have referred to, you can see that, at an on-the-ground level, it is really important that practitioners are working together, that we find a way to ensure that that can happen as a matter of routine and that we remove any barriers that are in place, because we have to do it from the ground up as well as from a system level down.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I am encouraged by both those answers. What type of collaborative approach will you both take to drive through the report's recommendations?

Dr Browne: We have already, in identifying the actions that need to be taken, started to consider what the various contributions need to be from Departments, including the ones that I mentioned. There are important implications here for the Department of Health, DFC and DFE. In respect of 'A Fair Start', which outlines a key strategy that we want to take forward, we established a programme board that has representatives from all those Departments. Each Department has actions identified against it, and Departments are preparing plans as to how they can take those actions forward. That is the high-level approach that we are taking to that. That will be managed and directed by a senior responsible officer (SRO) in the Department of Education. That will help to make sure that all Departments are contributing to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): How will you, though, as accounting officer and permanent secretary, make sure that the joined-upness that we talked about actually happens? We have had permanent secretaries in front of the Committee who have been frustrated by the lack of collaboration, cooperation and communication between Departments in terms of joined-up governance in Northern Ireland. Those are questions that we will also put to the new head of the Civil Service, who will be in front of the Committee later this month.

Can you assure us that the structure is in place to allow the joined-upness across Departments that is so needed to make sure that 'A Fair Start' actually delivers for young people?

Dr Browne: I make the general point that it is always a work in progress to make sure that, across various boundaries, people are working together, whether across Departments or other organisations. It is always a work in progress and is something that everyone has to work on collectively.

It is a combination of a number of things. First, it is making sure that the appropriate structures are in place and that there is clarity about roles and responsibilities. The programme board in respect of 'A Fair Start' has clear responsibilities, and each Department is allocated an action to take forward or is contributing to a particular action. Those reports come back to the SRO and then on to me.

There is something more important than that. You can set up the structures, but, in order to make them work, we need to work at collaborative and positive relationships. That is at the heart of the Programme for Government and the outcomes-based approach. It is that outcomes-based approach that we are applying to 'A Fair Start'. We are not interested simply in how much money we are going to spend on this, assuming, of course — I might come back to this — that we get the budget to take everything forward. What we are interested in is what difference that funding and those activities made and how we know that they made a difference. It is in that way that we will be driving collaboration, setting clear metrics about what we expect to see, and receiving reports as to whether those are being achieved. Where they are not being achieved, it is about identifying where we see the potential barriers or blockages or, indeed, just where there needs to be more discussion on how best to take something forward. It is in that way, and with that oversight, that we help to promote and ensure that the cooperation and collaboration are happening.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): You may be aware that the Committee produced an inquiry report on the capacity and capability of the Civil Service. The report made a number of recommendations, some of which would go a long way in helping to deliver the joined-upness that, we think, is needed, not just on this issue but across government in Northern Ireland, to achieve economies of scale, efficiency and effectiveness.

What role does the Education Authority play in ensuring that schools account for the funds that are given to them to improve the performance of children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, and that value for money is being obtained?

Ms Long: There is a range of funding mechanisms. There are those that are allocated to schools through the common funding scheme. The accountability for the common funding scheme rests with boards of governors. However, our local management of schools (LMS) finance teams work closely with schools on an ongoing basis on the production of schools' financial plans, and then on any interventions, requirements or advice and support that schools may need on those financial plans. That is done on a more global level on the basis of the schools' financial plans.

There are earmarked funds that the Department provides to the EA, some of which are devolved to schools. Monitoring against the earmarked funds from the EA to DE has a clear line of accountability around those objectives and what we do. It is more difficult to track the earmarked funding for some of the programmes against one specific programme of intervention. We know that from some examples of good practice where schools have applied innovation or, if you like, brought funds together. For example, we know that schools will quite often employ teachers with that funding, but they will employ one whole-time equivalent teacher rather than three 0.3 whole-time equivalent teachers, potentially using three separate pots of money, which makes sense and allows the schools to be flexible and innovative.

We monitor school spend closely. We work with schools on their spend. We have the schools' financial plans, and our LMS teams work closely with the schools on those. There are, therefore, varying degrees of line-by-line monitoring of that funding. That is also partly because of the administration associated with such monitoring that would be required at a school level and an EA level.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I will not comment on other schools. As said, I am sure that other schools are as well managed and led as the Boys' Model. How did the Boys' Model, working with you, use that TSN money to make such an impactful change to the lives of those young people in north Belfast, to deliver the results that they are getting and to improve their school life and experience, which, perhaps, other schools have not been able to do? What separates it from other schools that have not delivered like that?

Ms Long: A key point is the leadership and management of the school. I know that you said that that is not a commentary on other schools. I believe that strong leadership and management at school level are fundamental. It is also about working collaboratively with the community, feeling empowered to take decisions and using the funding to meet the needs of the school in the best way possible. Patricia or Michele may want to come in and say something on that point. It is about innovation, leadership and management as well as maximising those opportunities and joining together the totality of a school's resource for maximum benefit.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Patricia or Michele, would you like to add anything to what the chief executive just said?

Ms Patricia Cooney (Education Authority): Yes. I want to pick up on a member's earlier point about collaboration. That is what is working exceptionally well for the Boys' Model and other schools. We know that we are not making comparisons here. What works really well for the Boys' Model, which we want to look at more closely, is how it engages parents in the learning. It engages early with parents on careers development and careers advice, which raises the parents' aspirations. That then feeds into the aspirations of their children. The school has well-sited provision for parents to come in and engage, in space and time, in order to learn a little more about what the school and the children are doing. It has a very contextualised programme for the children who come into its area. It is also well aware of the social and non-academic needs of the children. The teachers know when it is time to take the foot off the pedal. They know that, if a child is late, there may be a reason for that. However, to ensure that standards do not slip, they will have a conversation offline with that child.

We are talking about all the pioneering models that we observe in the Boys' Model and other schools. They link really closely with the parents and the community and invest in those young people. If a young person has a programme in the morning and a programme in the afternoon, that is not additional teaching. It is about having a warm meal in their tummy. It is about making sure that the teacher shows them that they value them enough to give them their time after school. All of that allows the boys to begin to believe in themselves. It is a heavily layered and tiered programme to make the boys believe in themselves.

What we as an authority really want to do is to pull out some of the learning from those pioneering projects across Northern Ireland and contextualise that across other schools through our school improvement professional partners. We have assigned a school improvement professional partner to every school to gather intelligence and to see where there is effective practice, because there is effective practice in every school. Sometimes when you link into a school that is maybe not performing as well on outcomes and you come to look at best practice and good practice, you elevate its aspirations and outcomes. That is the school improvement model that we are really driving forward at the moment. It is about co-design with schools and learning from schools that are doing things really well and trying to disseminate that to other schools in Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir: Thank you, everyone, for coming back to the Public Accounts Committee this afternoon. It is appreciated, and I fully appreciate how this is a cross-cutting issue that stretches beyond the Department of Education and the Education Authority and requires an entire response from government and society. I have two questions, both of which relate to the visit to the Boys' Model School, which I found extremely valuable. I am very appreciative that that school accommodated us and others, as has been noted. There has been an increased provision of what are described as counselling services and different support services around the arena of mental health. Funding is being used to provide that, whether that is through TSN or other funding streams. Strictly speaking, the argument is that that is a Health function. What engagement is there with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA) to try to ensure that collaborative funding and arrangements are in place to ensure that those services can be accessed? It is important that they are accessed easily and without any stigma. Generally, that is within the educational environment. What more is the Department of Education and the Education Authority doing to engage with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency to ensure that there is a collaborative approach to this and that the TSN funding is targeted towards what it is meant to address?

Dr Browne: I will respond in the first instance, Mr Muir, to your question about mental health issues and counselling services. This has been a real issue, not just recently because of COVID but it has been exacerbated because of the impact of COVID on our children and young people. Working with the Department of Health, we have developed an emotional health and well-being framework, and we have provided co-funding with that Department to try to provide that support into schools. Some £5 million in recurrent funding has been made available by the Department of Education, and an additional £1.5 million has come from the Department of Health because it also, obviously, sees this as a priority. There are other aspects that are maybe not labelled as counselling, therapy or therapeutic services that are also important — for example, the nurture provision that is available in schools that assists children with their difficulties. On a recurrent basis, some £4 million is going into that nurture provision.

In addition, the Minister has launched the Healthy Happy Minds pilot this year, which will operate until the end of the year. After that, we will look at the learning from it. It includes counselling for primary-school pupils, but it goes beyond that to include other therapeutic services, including art therapy and activities, music therapy and activities, dance and drama and all those other aspects that are important in the development of children and young people and that are an important way for them to

express themselves and to express their feelings when maybe they lack the words. That can provide the means for the support that they need to be provided with.

The other aspect of our engagement with Health is on the special educational needs side. Sara may want to get into that. Obviously, health professionals are involved, and there is close cooperation with Health in providing the support that children with special educational needs require. That is most obviously in the early years and with Sure Start, where health professionals are involved right from the outset and fully in the delivery of those services, working alongside the other workers in that area to identify early the issues that the children have and to try to ensure that appropriate support is given to prevent those from developing into more serious issues. I point to some of those as examples. Sara, is there anything else that you want to add?

Ms Long: Throughout the pandemic and with our work on special educational needs, our on-the-ground relationships with Health have improved. We are working very closely with our colleagues at the Health and Social Care Board, at the PHA and at practitioner and trust level to maximise what we can deliver through cooperation.

There is no doubt that we still have a way to go when it comes to counselling at school level versus counselling at trust level versus counselling by community and voluntary groups — if we joined those up, what might that look like? — and we would all acknowledge that. We can say with confidence that support for the mental health of our children and young people has developed and been enhanced over the course of the pandemic. We need to build on that good work. As the permanent secretary said, a lot of that comes down to relationships, so it is important that we build on the positive relationships that we are developing.

Dr Browne: There was a second question that I cannot quite remember. It was about TSN funding.

Mr Muir: Yes. I will come back to it in a supplementary. I entirely agree with Sara that, while the pandemic has been challenging and devastating for families across Northern Ireland, it has improved working relations between Departments and agencies. That needs to be built on. One issue is funding for counselling services in particular. I know that it can sometimes be extremely difficult to get the funding for those services and that schools have to explore different avenues to get it. TSN and other funding streams are being used for that. Is there now more of an understanding of the need for a steady funding stream so that we can provide the services in schools without the schools having to struggle to get the money together to provide them?

Ms Long: The counselling service for post-primary schools is a universal service that is open to all pupils aged from 11 to 19. Healthy Happy Minds is being piloted for primary-school counselling provision, but, as the permanent secretary said, it is about much more than that. Part of the reason for it being in a pilot phase is that we are testing it. There are differing views on counselling for primary-school children, with nurture being the preferred method for younger children, but we all have to accept where we are with the impact of the pandemic in particular on our children's mental health. That has given us a good opportunity to test it from the perspective of expansion. The permanent secretary may want to comment further.

Dr Browne: Sara's point is very important. It is key that whatever support is provided is age-appropriate. In some cases, counselling may not be appropriate for very young children who will need other types of support, but, in other cases, it will be. We are not taking a blanket approach. That is why, in Healthy Happy Minds, the approach was broadened to take account of the full range of children's needs, how they might present and what the best way is of supporting them. Part of the idea of the pilot is to assess that and decide how best to take it forward, if the funding is available for it.

Mr Muir: I have one more question. We have talked a lot today about sharing good practice. One example of good practice that I saw at the Boys' Model was this: in advance of the young men starting year 8, there is a visit to each family home. The aim is to understand a bit more about the family and the young person's circumstances and also to allay any fears about commencing life at the Boys' Model. That is an extremely valuable undertaking, because it ensures that the school has a full 360-degree understanding of how things are in the home and of any support needed to meet any challenges the young person may have in their education.

What is being done to share such initiatives and encourage other schools to undertake them? To me, that was a shining example in that, on the young person's arrival on their first day at the beginning of

the academic term, the school has a good understanding of the young person and any fears are allayed.

Dr Browne: You make a very important point on the whole issue, Mr Muir. We know that any transitions in the education sector are difficult for young people and have to be managed very carefully. The work that the Boys' Model do is replicated across a range of schools. One of the features that I have found when I visit schools, particularly those that are dealing with children in disadvantaged circumstances, is just how well they know their children. They know the children and their backgrounds and make it their business to know them. When a child is behaving in a certain way in the school, they understand what the underlying factors might be and how best they might address that. That home/school liaison and contact is really important. It is a feature not only of the Boys' Model but of many schools right across Northern Ireland.

We share best practice in a whole range of ways. A recent example that I could point to is the series of studies called the "Star" case studies. They were undertaken by the Department and then published more widely. I am looking through them, and one of them refers to:

"Cross-phase links to support transition and to identify, apply and share best practice".

It relates to work done in Hazelwood College in Belfast in developing links with feeder primary schools for literacy and numeracy and having visits with the staff across the school to help the children to be familiarised, with teachers observing one another, which is quite unusual. The teachers observe one another with a view to pedagogy — how they are actually teaching. That had a real impact on helping the children to settle in. That is one example of how that would be done. Where we identify best practice, we disseminate it.

Mr Hilditch: Folks, you are very welcome. Funding has been fairly well covered but, in 2019-2020, £76 million of TSN money was given to schools. What percentage of schools use that as a general top-up of their budget?

Dr Browne: The key point about targeting social need is that it is part of the common funding formula. The common funding formula — the budget that is made available to schools — is unhypothecated, which means that it does not have to be used for specific purposes. Although there are elements in the formula that help to make up the overall amount that a school gets, the school is not bound to spend the money precisely on those factors. It is a way of identifying all the factors that raise the costs that a school will face and making sure that the budget is adequate.

However, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the common funding formula is based on delegation to schools. The premise is that schools are best placed to make the decisions, in the light of their own circumstances, as to how to deploy their resources, including their funding and teachers, and how best to organise themselves to ensure that they get the best outcomes for the children. TSN is the same. Schools will use TSN funding for a range of purposes. Some of that will be directed specifically towards children who are from socially disadvantaged circumstances, and some for broader, whole-school policies. It can make sense to take a whole-school or a whole-class approach rather than differentiating in order to have an impact. For example, attendance at school is a critical area. That is a whole-school policy. It is not something you apply to particular pupils. The impact that it has is more important for some pupils than others, but it is a whole-school approach. Likewise, there can be whole-class approaches. That will benefit some children more than others, but the whole-class approach does not differentiate.

The other point about the funding not just going to children who are in receipt of free school meals is that there are other kids who present with significant difficulties that might not be picked up by that indicator. They might be from working poor families and other children who present with particular difficulties. It is important that they can also benefit from the funding that is made available.

The evidence that we have is that the bulk of TSN funding goes on teaching. It supports teaching in smaller groups, which is where those who have difficulties can benefit. It is not generally smaller classes throughout the whole school but small-group teaching. We mentioned the Boys' Model. It has what it terms, if I recollect correctly, "access classes" and "progression classes", and it has what you might term mainstream classes. The children can progress through those various phases and get the support that they need at a particular time in order to improve and to get to where their peers are. Schools have that flexibility. We believe that schools are best placed to make those kind of decisions.

Mr Hilditch: Are there schools that just use TSN funding for a general top-up?

Dr Browne: I am not sure what you mean by a "general top-up". They will use it for whatever they see as the pressures that they face.

Mr Hilditch: The use to which those funds are put seems to be quite wide-ranging.

Dr Browne: Getting TSN returns was an issue for a number of years, but, with our online system, this year, we have had over 700 returns from schools about how they are spending their TSN money, and we will be able to analyse that.

Mr Hilditch: Is that a big improvement compared with previous years?

Dr Browne: There had been a problem, with action short of a strike and schools not cooperating, so stuff had not been coming back. It is a very big improvement. The evidence from the last figures that we had in 2011 is this: 41% of the TSN money goes on the smaller classes and smaller teaching groups to which I referred; around 38% goes on specialist support for learning needs; 7% goes on pastoral care, home/school liaison and all those things around liaising with the community and parents that we talked about; 2% goes on staff development; 7% goes on curriculum materials; and 5% goes on other things. There is no evidence of a general use of TSN funding for things that are not appropriate.

That is all set out in the school development plan, and the school has to identify its priorities, how it is using all its money and, specifically, how it is using its TSN funding. That information is there and available for the EA, CCMS and the inspectorate to look at in order to make sure that the money is being used appropriately to meet the key issues that are present in the school.

Mr Hilditch: You mentioned the free school meals situation. Concerns were raised about whether that was the best way to draw those matters out. What is the Department doing to ensure that the data that it requires demonstrates the effectiveness of the funding that is provided in raising the attainment of pupils who receive free school meals, and is it the best way to identify the issues? In your remarks, you mentioned what I would term "people slipping through the process".

Dr Browne: The debate about the best indicator has been going for 20 or 30 years. There is no perfect indicator for identifying all those who either come from socially disadvantaged circumstances or have other issues that we need to support in school. The free school meals indicator is used because it is readily available and specific to the pupil. It does not relate to an area, because some kids in the area may not go to the local school. It relates to the pupils who are in the school, and it is updated every year. Those are the key characteristics.

Research has measured the association between free school meals, whether or not it is a good reflection on deprivation and also how it is associated with lower attainment. Study after study has demonstrated that free school meals is a very strong indicator, and it is widely used and accepted.

When it comes to how the TSN money is used and whether it is effective, the progress of young people who were entitled to free school meals who achieved five plus GCSEs at grades A* to C increased from 26% to 50% over the period in question. That is a very significant increase. It was a greater increase than that achieved for the pupils who were not on free school meals, and it led to some narrowing of the gap between the two groups. Real, absolute levels of achievement and attainment increased significantly, and there was some closing of the gap. The issue is that — we could spend a long time talking about it — the whole impact of social deprivation on attainment is a worldwide phenomenon. It is one that no system has completely cracked and that every system works on. The evidence from international studies suggests that, here, it is less of a factor than in other countries across the OECD. I put that down in part to the policies of the Department in that area.

Mr Hilditch: Pursuing alternative measures was mentioned. Will you indicate what those would be?

Dr Browne: The Department is considering a review as to whether the free school meals indicator remains the best measure. It also really depends on the policy that is being delivered. There could be other policies where it makes more sense to take an area-based approach and to use the measures of deprivation that come from the census. In light of the policy, we would look at what we are trying to achieve, how we deliver the programme and what, therefore, gives us the best measure.

Mr Hilditch: Do you look at places on an international level?

Dr Browne: Sorry, I missed the start of your question.

Mr Hilditch: Do you look at places on an international level to see what alternatives are about?

Dr Browne: Yes, we do. That was the point that I made earlier. If you look further, in the UK, the free school meals indicator is widely used, as are some of the place-based measures that come from the census. That is fairly common across other countries.

Mr Hilditch: At the last evidence session, the Committee was not convinced that there was enough data and evidence on accountability and assessments to inform policymaking on closing the gap in educational attainment. Is that a fair assessment?

Dr Browne: It is true to say that there has been difficulty over the past number of years as a consequence of industrial action in being able to harness the information that had been coming through previously from schools. However, the sources of information that we have available to us to show how effective our policies are, relate to, for example, the international surveys that I mentioned, which are conducted here in Northern Ireland at primary-school level and post-primary level. We have the progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS), which looks at reading, and trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS), which looks at maths and science. At post-primary level, we have the programme for international student assessment (PISA), which looks at student attainment for those who are aged 15. In all those measures, particularly at primary level, Northern Ireland is above the OECD average, and, in fact, our young people are performing at the upper end of the OECD scores. At post-primary level, we are at or slightly above the OECD average. Those broader measures and comparators — the same instruments are used in every country in order to make sure that we making a fair comparison — indicate that good progress is being made and that standards here are comparable with those elsewhere. Of course, we are always looking to try to do better than that.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you.

Mr McHugh: Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig. You are all very welcome to the meeting today. There have been some very interesting comments to date, and many of them have covered areas that I intended to ask about. I will go back to what appears, at the present time anyway, to be progress on identifying need and ensuring delivery. When it comes to targeting social need, there has been a poor response from schools, in the first instance, in responding to the planner. Why did so many schools not feed into that?

Dr Browne: There was a change in the system. Originally, when targeting social need funding was given out, that was done as part of the common funding formula, and there was a particular return in the common funding formula that asked for a financial return indicating how schools used their funding. That continued until 2010 or 2011, and it indicated the sort of things, as I mentioned to Mr Hilditch, that the money was spent on, such as the smaller classes, the specialist support and so forth. There were very good returns at that point. A decision was then taken, when new regulations came in about school development planning and when the Every School a Good School policy came in, that it was important that how schools were using the funding was included as part of their plan. Therefore, it became that a part of the plan should be returned and that there should be an annex setting out exactly how schools spend the TSN funding. In the first instance, that change created a little bit of disruption.

We then got into the whole area of the difficulties around industrial relations and the action short of strike, and schools were not making the returns. The last time, about 6% of schools made returns. When we analysed the expenditure for that 6% of schools, it showed the same pattern that we had seen in the period from 2005-06 to 2010-11, so there was nothing in that that suggested that there was significant change in the ways schools were spending their money. I am pleased to say that, with the work that the Department has done in computerising the return and with the Minister having written to schools encouraging them to make a return, to date, 731 schools have made that return, which is about 60% of the schools that could be making a return. So, we will have a really good evidence base, and we will analyse that and will be able to see whether there has been any change in the pattern of how schools are using their funding.

Mr McHugh: In making a judgement on whether there is maybe a more efficient, targeted way to ensure that the funds are spent in the correct way, are you adopting any approach to the other 40% of schools that have not made returns? Or does that imply once again, as has been alluded to, that, when it comes to receiving the funding in the first instance, they do not have to account for it in a way that describes to you how they targeted it? Has the Education Authority taken that up with those schools?

Dr Browne: I will go back to the comments that I made in my opening remarks about what our school improvement policy is based on. It is based on the view that the school and the board of governors are responsible for the way they use resources and for identifying the issues in the school and the actions that need to be taken. We have highly qualified professional teachers and principals, as well as boards of governors, who are assisted by information that the Department provides about how similar schools in similar circumstances are doing. Armed with that information, they are best placed, as the professionals on the ground, to make decisions about how the funding should be used. That is why the funding is in the formula. We do not tell schools exactly how they should use it, however, because every school is different and will have its own circumstances that it wants to address.

There are some other initiatives outside the common funding formula where a view is taken, perhaps by the Minister, or usually by the Minister — in fact, always by the Minister — on what he or she wishes to target. Those are the earmarked funds that were referred to. We have had some examples of that with programmes that specifically target numeracy and literacy. Funds are directed towards those particular issues, and monitoring returns are made to make sure that the money was spent on them. Those earmarked funds are for the very specific issues that the Minister identifies. In the common funding formula, the money is made available to the school for it decide and to give it flexibility.

More recently, when we reviewed the Engage programme after its first year, one of the key things that we did, based on feedback from schools, was to give them more flexibility in how they use the funding. The reality is that if the Department is trying to determine or predetermine from a distance how funding should be spent, it will not work in every single circumstance. The schools are best placed to make those decisions. We have given the schools that extra flexibility, and they have welcomed it.

Mr McHugh: I totally understand that schools can make the decisions for themselves, but, at the same time, I am sure that there is a degree of accountability, meaning that the Education Authority should pursue those schools that do not make returns.

Ms Long: Schools submit their financial plans to the Education Authority. That is the mechanism by which their funds are monitored, if you like. Discussions are had with schools. The administration that is associated with earmarked funding, at the school level and at the Education Authority level, can be significant. It is always about getting the balance right between making sure that we have right and appropriate accountability and not overburdening schools with administrative returns.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agaibh. Thank you for your answers.

Mr Beggs: I am a governor of a Horizon Sure Start facility, and I am aware that a copious amount of data is recorded. How is that data being used to give feedback and learning?

Dr Browne: I will make a few comments, and then I will invite Linda, who is somewhere on StarLeaf, to come in on that, because she leads on Sure Start. One of the earlier commentaries that was made by one of our reviews — it is referenced in the report — was that there was not sufficient evidence clearly setting out what outcomes were achieved in Sure Start.

A significant amount of work has been undertaken over the past four or five years in order to identify clear instruments that can identify the progress that has been made in children's development and learning; to quantify and measure that progress; and then, in doing that, to identify what good practice is and to disseminate it. The Audit Office report talks about some of those results. It talks about the 74% of children who attended a developmental programme for two- to three-year-olds and who were tracked, along with the progress that they made, using the early years WellComm toolkit. That is one of the instruments. There is also the Outcomes Star toolkit, which has a range of elements that are measured. That indicated that child development had improved for 60% of families attending a Sure Start project. Those instruments are tried and tested. They are applied in the Sure Start programmes and used to track children's progress. If Linda is there, perhaps she would like to add some further comments.

Mrs Linda Drysdale (Department of Education): Yes. Can you hear me?

Dr Browne: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes, we can.

Mrs Drysdale: As Dr Browne said, there has been significant development in how we measure Sure Start outcomes and in the tools that are used over time to make sure that we have the evidence that supports the development of children.

Sure Start has five key policy outcomes. We align all the evidence that we collect to demonstrate how each of those policy outcomes is met, and we work continually on that. As Dr Browne said, Sure Start is very much a collaborative approach between the Department of Education and the Health and Social Care Board in the Department of Health. We continually work with them to develop ways to make sure that the evidence that we are collecting from the Sure Start projects is meaningful. It is collected so that it can be demonstrated that children have improved and that that overall improvement is contributing towards achievement of the policy outcomes.

Mr Beggs: What feedback goes to the Sure Start projects to point out to them good practice or, for that matter, areas where they need to improve?

Mrs Drysdale: The evidence is collated at the Sure Start project level. The Sure Start programme is administered by the Health and Social Care Board, so achievement will be measured at project level. Individual managers in the Health and Social Care Board will look at what was achieved by projects. They will also be able to see what was achieved across all the projects.

We have 38 Sure Start projects, and the managers will be able to feed back to them areas they are doing well in or where there might be areas that they need to look at. Sure Start is very much about learning and developing from shared practice. The Sure Start projects are excellent at that. They work closely together. There are many events and engagements at which Sure Start projects will put forward areas where they tried something and it worked really well, and they share that information with the other projects to see whether that might be something they could try in their areas.

The Education and Training Inspectorate looks at Sure Start on an annual basis and identifies areas of really good practice. Each year, it reports to us and provides evidence of that really good practice, which is then shared across all the Sure Start projects. That allows for continual development of Sure Start. The Education and Training Inspectorate will follow up on previous recommendations to see that there has been continual development and that it has been shared across all 38 Sure Start projects.

Mr Beggs: I am aware of learning between Sure Start projects, but my question was specifically about the learning that is coming from the copious amounts of data that is being recorded, and I am not hearing that.

One area that I ask you to look at, because I am aware of how beneficial this is, is the number of young people with speech and language issues that get picked up very early through Sure Start. That means that there should be a reduced number of young people who are first picked up at primary school by Sure Start. That is an essential marker, otherwise those young people are sitting at the back of their classrooms having difficulty engaging. My concern about the data is that we are not really getting useful feedback or that we are being encouraged by the data to go in what I consider to be significant directions. There is good sharing between Sure Start programmes.

I will leave with you that thought about speech and language issues being picked up earlier. Otherwise, parents frequently would not be able to overcome the various hurdles in the conventional health trust route.

Dr Browne: First of all, I do not accept that data is not being used. The data is being used, and there is communication between the professionals who are involved with Sure Start on what works and on making sure that that is disseminated.

Your point about speech and language services is really important. When I visited Glenbrook Sure Start nursery in north Belfast and met Caroline Milligan, she talked to me about the approach that it takes. She mentioned specifically her approach of what she called "targeted universalism". That seems to be a bit of an oxymoron, but it goes to the heart of the point that you are making.

The approach that Sure Start takes is to ensure that it is open to all the parents and children in the area. It does not target right from the outset. It is open to all. It encourages the parents to come in, many of whom may be a bit reluctant or unsure. They may not like to go outside their area or immediate neighbourhood. They are not sure how they are going to engage with professionals. They are encouraged in by things like the Play and Stay programme. In the course of that work, those professionals can identify other needs that the children have, which may include speech and language. Having built up trust with parents, they can then signpost them and encourage them to other services. I am sure that you have experienced that in the Sure Start group that you are involved with. That is a really important aspect of it.

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely. I will turn to expenditure on TSN. During our visit to the Boys' Model, we were given very clear direction on how a range of funding is being targeted as it was intended to appropriate areas. TSN funding was spent on additional maths and English teachers, youth workers and a well-being period. Those were some examples. It was a very good use of TSN funds for the benefit of those children. How do you ensure that that money is always targeted towards the particular group that it is intended for, rather than just going into the school pot?

Dr Browne: That goes to the point that I made earlier, Mr Beggs, which is that schools have delegated budgets. A formula makes up the various elements of that, and it includes TSN for those children who are either achieving at a low level and/or are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. That money is made available to the school. It is for the principal, working with the board of governors, through the school development planning process, supported by the information that we provide about other schools in similar circumstances, such as the attainment of their pupils and so forth, to identify the issues that there are in the school and allocate resources to them.

That money is not hypothecated towards individual free school meal-entitled children. It is there to take account of the issues that they and other children present. I mentioned that any indicator is not perfect and that there will be other children who have similar difficulties and disadvantaged circumstances but who would not be picked up by qualifying for free school meals and who we want to ensure can benefit from that funding. That approach is taken not just here but in England through the premium that is provided there to support schools. They recognise that whole-class and whole-school approaches are also important in benefiting all children but especially those who present with particular circumstances.

We can check whether the money is being used well because that is set out in the school development plan, which is available when the ETI comes to inspect the school. District inspectors go into schools on a regular basis and are aware of how the schools are spending their funding. We have a good handle on how schools are using the funding and whether it is being used effectively.

Mr Beggs: You indicate that it is primarily the responsibility of the school, the senior staff and the governors to decide how the money is spent and to maximise the benefit from TSN funding. Of course, in order to maximise the opportunities in education, it is important that the children and teachers are all in school. I am curious about this: how do you feed back to schools and encourage the use of TSN funding when, in some wards, up to 35% of year 8 to year 12 children have less than 85% school attendance? Do you ensure that some of that money is targeted to assist those young people to return to school and provide extra outside school activity, which is clearly working in the likes of the Boys' Model?

Dr Browne: I will make a few comments on that, and others may wish to come in. School attendance is one of those whole-school policies that I referred to. It will have a particular impact on children in disadvantaged and other difficult circumstances, but it is applied across the entire school. It is a key indicator for any school, and we expect to see it reflected in the school development plan. We expect principals and boards of governors to pay attention to it.

We have talked before about visits to schools, and, at the previous evidence session I attended, I mentioned my visit to Holy Cross Boys' Primary School. They talked about going out to pupils' homes, knocking on doors and making sure that the children came into school. However, there is something in that that is really important about the relationships that schools build with parents. They can encourage parents to see the value of education and the importance of not missing any days at school if possible. That goes to the heart of what we talked about earlier, which was the connections between schools and parents, and schools and the community.

Some schools use TSN funding to support pastoral care, which picks up on issues that many of those young children face. In many cases, as I am sure you are only too aware, there can be very complicated reasons why a child might not come into school. It is not just because the child does not want to come to school. That pastoral care and support can help to increase understanding and provide the support that is necessary for home/school liaison. I do not know whether any of my colleagues or Sara want to say anything.

Ms Long: Does Patricia want to comment on some of the models of good practice that some schools have used the TSN funding for in that area?

Ms Cooney: Thank you, Sara. We are beginning to have conversations with our school principals through the school improvement model that I referenced earlier, where each school has a school improvement professional partner (SIPP) with whom it engages in conversations. The model that we are looking at as we are driving forward, particularly so that we do not let anybody slip through the net, involves support, challenge and intervention. It is nice to go and have a cup of coffee and learn what is going on in a school, but it is also great to go in with the information that you have. You have just given me a piece of information that our SIPPs use very often, which is the contextual school individual data.

If the school's attendance, for example, as you have said, is at 85% [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] to the school and going through the school development plan, and if there were no mitigating strategies or actions in the school development plan to address what is a low level of attendance, our concerns would be about why there are none. We would have a harder conversation with the school about the targets and actions that it is putting in place and how it is identifying the needs of its children.

It is very important to say that, over the past year in particular, a number of pots of funding have gone into schools. Engage has been a particularly effective fund that schools are using exceptionally well in order to ensure that their children are in a better place emotionally to access learning and then to improve their literacy and numeracy. In the conversations that the SIPPs are having with their school leaders, they are talking about the TSN funding. They are talking about how they are going to use Healthy Happy Minds, how they use their looked-after children funding and other pots and how they merge the different pots to get as much as they possibly can from the funding while ensuring that they meet its objectives.

That is an area that we are moving into more and more through the challenge, support and intervention model that the school improvement professionals are taking forward. You will all be aware that, during lockdown, we developed what for us is a very pioneering, collaborative model with all the partner organisations. That was realised through a cross-organisation link officer. That officer was a single officer who was attached to every school across Northern Ireland and drawn from one of the three or four main partner bodies that were supporting schools.

The conversations at the start of the lockdowns and the disrupted learning were very much focused on help with health matters, attendance issues and remote learning. That role has evolved, and there are more and more conversations asking, "How are you using your funding? How are you looking at the impact on the learner?" All those conversations come together to give us a really good angle and intelligence base on how schools are using their funding. We want to drive forward that model so that, if we come out of COVID, the SIPP has a conversation that is mainly about the identification of need and how schools are using the different pots of money to get really targeted interventions as early as possible.

Mr Beggs: I mentioned the importance of having schoolchildren and teachers in school. My concern about that is that I am aware that there is a senior teacher who has been out of school for two years because of numerous spurious complaints. My question to Ms Long is this: are you satisfied that, when there are errors in leadership and further guidance to governors is needed, HR support and intervention from the Education Authority is there in order to ensure that large amounts of public funds are not wasted?

Ms Long: Our HR team works closely with schools and boards of governors, as does Michele and her team, where difficulties are being encountered in a school. Where a wide range of difficulties is being encountered by a school, we will work collaboratively. We have cross-directorate case management for any schools that are in difficulty. That includes input, as required, from our education directorate, our HR directorate and our children and young people's services directorate.

Mr Beggs: Do you accept that a competent senior professional's being out of school for two years is unacceptable and a waste of money?

Ms Long: It is not ideal, and it is not a circumstance in which we would want to find ourselves. As I say, we work closely with schools, individuals and their trade unions to try to address those issues.

Mr Beggs: In particular, are you responding to trade unions' concerns that have been highlighted today through criticism of Ballyclare Secondary School?

Ms Long: There has been significant intervention by the Education Authority in Ballyclare Secondary School. It would not be appropriate for me to discuss the individual or complex issues here today, but I am aware of them, and I know that Michele and her team have spent a significant amount of time addressing them.

Mr Beggs: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes. Whatever is or is not going on in Ballyclare Secondary School is not a matter for this Committee or inquiry.

I will bring in Ms Hunter before I ask some questions.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the panel for being here. Mr Beggs has actually raised a number of questions that I had. I welcome his point on the issues on speech and language. Through my office, I have noted that, post-COVID, there has definitely been an increase in the number of young people in those early years services. Some parents feel that, due to a lack of socialisation during COVID, a few issues have come up, so I welcome that that has been raised.

I have just one question. We talked about specific areas of improvement and addressing specific needs. Have any specific concerns or barriers to educational achievement been noted for children in rural areas? The reason why I ask is that, recently, I spoke to a principal of a rural school, who said that, oftentimes, he feels that children in more urban areas have more access to academic support. Are you aware of that, and has it been considered?

Dr Browne: I imagine that, in rural areas, there may be some issues that are common to the delivery of all services, which may be around access and proximity. However, I am not aware of any of the detail. Perhaps Sara or some of our colleagues will have a view on that.

Ms Long: Again, I will ask Patricia to come in on that. She is a former school leader in a rural area and recognises those issues all too well. I do not believe that anything formal has been done on TSN in rural areas particularly, given that TSN funding is child dependent, rather than area dependent, as the permanent secretary said. Therefore, I do not believe that that would have an impact. I will ask Patricia — I am looking at my microphone — if she wants to comment on that.

Ms Cooney: Yes, Sara, I agree. TSN funding is very welcome because it allows you to bring in additional resource and teachers and to teach in smaller numbers etc. Cara, yes, there would be issues in transport and farming, such as when children are not available because they need to work on the farm etc. However, those are all different contextual issues. Primary and post-primary-school principals work strongly together on those. You would ensure that the parent gets the child to school, and you would follow it up quickly if the child were not in school.

With transport, it is like everywhere across Northern Ireland when there is snow; there may be snow days. However, those types of problems will probably be reduced because of the learning during COVID, when our remote learning policies and practices were improved. Therefore, if a child is at home because of a snow day or transport issues, their remote learning can continue. I do not know of anything that is coming through to us from the SIPPs on rurality in particular.

Ms Hunter: Thank you very much. That definitely clears up a number of questions that I had. A large part of my constituency is rural. I am sure that other members will agree that there are definitely struggles with transport and things like that, weather impacts and, of course, the digital divide and Wi-Fi issues. I am content. Thank you very much for being here.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I will ask a few questions. The issue of mental health and general well-being is huge in many constituencies and is particularly acute in mine. It has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and the issues connected with it for families, and particularly for working-class and low-income households. From talking to school principals in my area, I know that front-line Education money has to be redirected to buy in professional services to help young people with their mental health and general well-being. I have raised that with you both before. That comes out of the Education budget. Sara, you said that support was enhanced and developed during the pandemic. I welcome that, but can you give an example of how that has helped and how you have worked with the Department of Health?

Ms Long: Yes, absolutely. The permanent secretary referred to the health and emotional well-being framework developed between the Department of Education and the Department of Health. That has been fundamental in helping to bring that forward. We have worked closely with the Public Health Agency and our colleagues in Health throughout the pandemic. A range of materials has been developed for young people, and all of that was done in collaboration with our colleagues in Health.

As you know, our Youth Service plays a significant role in this area. It has also played a significant role during the pandemic and had some very targeted mental health initiatives, many of which were cross-departmental and involved colleagues in Justice and in health and social care. Throughout the pandemic, our ongoing and sustained links allowed us to capture that across all the areas that we delivered. Therefore, anything that we were driving forward in that space had input from Health. Things such as the Text-a-Nurse scheme for children and young people were developed with cross-departmental collaboration.

Dr Browne: Chair, can I make a comment on your point about the Education budget having to pick up all those other issues? You are absolutely right. The fact is that schools are based and centred in communities, and the pupils that go to those schools come from the communities, with all the issues that those communities have. It is critical that we work with other Departments — as we do — to try to encourage them to improve the delivery of services in the community, whether those are mental health services or other support for children and young people.

The reality is, however, and always has been, that when young children come to school still presenting with issues, teachers and principals simply have to deal with that. If they do not deal with it or cannot manage it, or help the young people to manage it, the young people will not be able to learn and develop. That is why we have free school meals, for example; that is why we deliver those kinds of programmes. Education should not necessarily deliver meals, but we do it because we know the benefit to children of having proper nutrition and being properly fed, enabling them to concentrate during the day. Likewise, we need to pick up on any emotional and mental health issues that have not been addressed in the community.

It is about the two things working together. I think that this is the thrust of your point: we would like to see a slightly different balance whereby more of it is picked up by other Departments. More of the Education budget could then be focused purely on education and learning, but the Education budget will always have to deal with an element of those issues that remain when children present at school.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): You both mentioned Healthy Happy Minds.

Dr Browne: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): I presume that that is a pilot. Where is the pilot being run? How many schools is it being run in? What is the budget?

Dr Browne: I can answer some of those questions. It is a pilot. It came in response to calls from a range of stakeholders to address the mental health needs that were presenting in primary schools. As I mentioned earlier, it was originally presented as counselling being needed in primary schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes.

Dr Browne: Our view was that we need to think more broadly than that; we do not want to medicalise every issue that a child presents with. We want to look at what the age-appropriate support is. That was broadened out, therefore, to be counselling and other therapeutic support; I mentioned art, music, dance and drama. It is any of those kinds of activities that can help the children and young people. It is

a pilot. It was launched on 2 November and will run to the end of this year. Some £5 million of funding was secured for this year, and it was agreed that if the pilot does not progress, but some of the children are receiving support, there would be some transitional arrangements to ensure that they continue to receive that support for some months afterwards. We do not want everything to come to a complete stop.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): That is £5 million of funding. Will you come back to the Committee with the schools involved, the geographical areas and spread —

Dr Browne: I can do that, Chair. Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): — and whether there is an urban/rural mix?

On that point, I sit on what is called the suicide health information networking education (SHINE) forum in greater Shankill in north Belfast, on which representatives of the Boys' Model, Girls' Model, Belfast Royal Academy and Hazelwood College also sit. There are also representatives of the primary schools in the area. Primary-school principals have raised with me that young people are presenting with and manifesting issues with mental health and general well-being. That is very worrying. It comes back to the point of early intervention being cheaper, but, for the young people involved, their families, the schools and their friends, the classroom is also more effective. We need to bear that in mind.

Mr Beggs, do you want to come in very briefly.

Mr Beggs: Yes. On well-being, when we visited the Boys' Model, we briefly joined a young class that was taking part in a well-being period. That is a regular feature at the school, and I was very impressed with what I saw in that brief moment. Are you monitoring in any way to take the good practice from that? Given the stress about well-being among many young people, that should perhaps be widened out to every school if possible. Are you closely monitoring what I consider to be a very successful pilot that is been carried out under that school's initiative?

Dr Browne: Sara mentioned the emotional health and well-being strategy. Through that, and the activities in it, we will pick up on best practice, such as you described. We can get that information through the inspectorate and the services that are provided by the EA when it is in touch with schools.

I absolutely agree with you about the concept of well-being. Indeed, those in some of the schools that I visited talked about the importance of children being able to self-regulate their behaviour to deal with the ups and downs that everyone experiences. Some children can cope with those better than others. It is understanding well-being and that sometimes things can appear bleak and you can be anxious or upset. There are ways of dealing with that and teaching children and young people the strategies to deal with that. Making them aware that that is normal and what everyone experiences, and providing the opportunity for them to talk about that is critical. That was something that the schools that I visited, such as the Boys' Model, Holy Cross and Mercy College, spend a lot of time on. That is really important, and, as you said, it was exacerbated by what has happened during COVID.

Mr Beggs: This is my final question, if I may, Chairman. You mentioned the flexibility of the funding and said that it is up to schools to decide how to use it. However, at the Boys' Model, we learned that it had to fight annually to get the flexibility to make better use of its SEN funding. We were advised previously that a pilot was being considered to look at that formally, but we certainly picked up from the senior management team of the school how much they valued that flexibility and the better value that they thought they were getting for the benefit of the young people. How is the formal pilot that was referred to by some of your colleagues previously developing?

Ms Long: OK. I will pick that up. You will know that, following the PAC recommendations, the Department commissioned an independent review of SEN processes. Part of that is about the effectiveness of using classroom assistants, for example. Part of what schools fed back to us when they said that they would like more flexibility is that they do not necessarily need to employ classroom assistants and can use other models.

I will ask Michelle to talk you through our pilot. It is a small pilot while we await the outcome of the more formal research on the effectiveness of the model. It will be very important for us to anchor any further decision-making on that more formal research, but we have undertaken a small pilot in that area, as we committed to do. Michelle.

Ms Michele Corkey (Education Authority): Thank you, Sara. Our link officers work very closely with our schools to maximise and tailor the support that we give to children with special educational needs and to use resources effectively and efficiently to meet their needs. If, for example, a child in a class needed a classroom assistant for 10 hours, and then a second child required likewise, we would employ one classroom assistant, and then the children would get access to a classroom assistant for their full school day. We try to build in flexibility.

As Sara said, we started a pilot in an inner-city school. It was to involve more schools, but COVID hit and reduced our ability to do that. The purpose of the pilot is to target literacy and numeracy support for individual SEN pupils with newly qualified teachers. It is also to promote team teaching and team mentoring in a whole-class setting. In addition, it is to embed the professional development of newly qualified teachers and to use more experienced teachers as mentors and role models for them. Furthermore, it is to give special needs pupils some pre-teaching of key lessons so that they can experience higher levels of success in the class. One of its main purposes is to deal with challenging behaviour and problematic attendance, which has been mentioned this afternoon.

After working with the school for 18 months, we can say that the targeted pupils have increased their attendance and reduced their challenging behaviours. They have also increased their attainment across key subjects, including English and maths. There has been 100% buy-in from the staff to the whole-school approach to supporting learners, including our most vulnerable learners. Newly qualified teachers, staff, parents and pupils have engaged in some comprehensive evaluative exercises, and the baseline data is being monitored for academic research purposes. The role of the classroom assistants in that pilot is definitely more clearly defined and understood in supporting the learning in class.

Mr Beggs: I look forward to hearing the formal outcome.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): There is such cynicism in your voice.

Mr Beggs mentioned well-being. The Boys' Model is working very well in collaboration with Streetbeat. I declare an interest: I am on the board of Streetbeat. The young people really enjoyed that session. It is innovative, and it is good for the young people. It is good for the school, but it is also good for Streetbeat. Many of those young people work with Streetbeat people in the evenings, and they have a relationship with them, which really is important in getting the maximum outcome.

You mentioned the Youth Service. I attended the opening of the refurbished Hammer centre in May. I was pleased to see that Mark McBride and his team were working with some of the young people who were involved in the civil unrest in April. That work is hugely valuable, and they are to be commended for it. We are appreciative of that work.

I have a question for you, Mark, about 'A Fair Start'. Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy whiskey. If 'A Fair Start' is to be implemented and make the change that everybody wants to see, particularly Dr Purdy and his team, will the funding and resource be provided, not just by your Department but across the Education family and government? As we know, it cuts across government.

Dr Browne: The 'A Fair Start' report came from NDNA, but it was commissioned by the Education Minister and is a priority for the Department. A key part of the report, as I mentioned earlier, was the fact that it was taken to the Executive for their endorsement. We need the support of the Executive to deal with this issue, for all the reasons that you described. The other Departments need to contribute. We also need the resource to put to it. The funding for the second year of 'A Fair Start' would be £11 million, and, as we get in to the fifth year, I think that it is up to £77 million. A significant commitment is required. That commitment from the Executive, and the fact that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will be seeking updates twice a year, are important ways of ensuring that this issue remains on the agenda and is given priority.

You asked a hard question about buying whiskey — whether the funding will be there. Some £4 million has been put aside for this year from the Department's baseline to allow a start on early actions. That will help us with a review of Sure Start staffing and to make an earlier start on seven additional nurture units. It will help us to do work with the youth sector, in training young people in disadvantaged areas. We will take 15-year-olds through a programme and train them as potential leaders of volunteers in their own area. It will also support the provision of additional digital devices to those children who do not have access to them — that was another important element of the report.

Those are four concrete actions that we are taking forward, and there are more. There are a number of other reviews in behind that.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Are they happening now?

Dr Browne: They are being implemented before the end of this year. The funding is there for that, and we are starting to implement them, using the spend this year.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Yes, so the funding is there for this year.

Dr Browne: The funding is there for this year, and the Minister has given a commitment that, if the programmes are started and people are employed, the funding will be there. In the case of the youth programme, for example, it will be there for two years. It is difficult, however, because we are awaiting, as you know, a Budget announcement. We have some sense of what that is telling us. I mentioned the pressures that we have. We are going to have to make some hard decisions as to whether we can fund 'A Fair Start', whether that requires us to stop other programmes, and how we arrive at those priorities.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): My view is that Northern Ireland plc cannot afford not to fund 'A Fair Start'.

Dr Browne: Well, I welcome your support on that, Chair, because that is our view as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): The Committee has unanimously taken that view during the inquiry; everyone has said that. Nevertheless, the reality is, and this goes back to the point that I made earlier, that money needs to be brought to the centre, across government — I am not saying that all of it can initially be paid for — to ensure that 'A Fair Start' is funded and can make the difference that it can and should make. Government should understand that early interventions, as I have said, are cheaper, more effective and more cost-effective.

That funding needs to be put in place for young people on a range of societal issues, not just their education. I am making that point to you, but I assure you that we will equally make it to the head of the Civil Service when she comes before the Committee, because we feel strongly about this issue. It may be an educational issue, and we fully understand that it is something over which the Education Committee has primacy, but I assure you that, in this inquiry, we are absolutely of that opinion.

Dr Browne: I welcome the Committee's support, Chair. Our Minister has been meeting other Ministers — it has gone beyond the collective Executive endorsement — to talk through 'A Fair Start' and to encourage their support.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Earlier, you said that more needs to be done to reduce the differential. I agree entirely, and the Boys' Model is a good exemplar of that. One of the things that might come out of this is that what has been going on at the Boys' Model since we, the Audit Office, the permanent secretary, the head of the Civil Service and the Minister visited the school, as Mr Beggs and Mr Muir can attest, is a very good exemplar of how things should be done. There are other schools — I am on the board of governors of the Girls' Model — that, equally, are doing tremendously well. I visited Mercy College only a couple of weeks ago, where tremendous work is being done. The work that is going on would be a good handbook for other schools that, hitherto, have not been able to deliver in the way that those schools that I mentioned have.

Dr Browne: I agree, Chair. On a minor point of accuracy, the head of the Civil Service had planned to go to the Boys' Model but had to cancel and has rearranged the visit. On your broader point about best practice, this goes beyond the Boys' Model. Earlier, I mentioned some examples of the "Star" case studies of schools that are doing well. We want to draw on best practice across a range of schools and make that available in order to spread best practice. That is what we will be focused on.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. All members who wished to ask questions have had the opportunity. Mr Donnelly, do you have anything further to add?

Mr Kieran Donnelly (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No, Chair, thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): Mr Stevenson, do you have anything that you would like to say?

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): Nothing from me, Chair, thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Humphrey): OK. Thank you for your attendance.