



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview of Priorities:  
Department of Education

21 February 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Overview of Priorities: Department of Education

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

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)  
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr David Brooks  
Ms Cheryl Brownlee  
Mr Robbie Butler  
Ms Cara Hunter  
Mrs Cathy Mason  
Ms Kate Nicholl

#### **Witnesses:**

Mr Ronnie Armour	Department of Education
Dr Mark Browne	Department of Education
Mrs Linsey Farrell	Department of Education

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Good afternoon, and thank you for your patience and for joining the Committee this afternoon. I welcome Dr Mark Browne, the Department's accounting officer and permanent secretary; Ronnie Armour, deputy secretary, resources, governance and early years; and Linsey Farrell, deputy secretary. I invite you to make a brief 10-minute presentation on the Department's priorities, and then we will move to questions from members.

**Dr Mark Browne (Department of Education):** Thank you very much, Chairperson. We very much welcome the opportunity to be here today to talk about the challenges and opportunities in the education sector.

Education is key to giving our children and young people the best start in life. The education sector is facing some of the greatest challenges that we have seen in a generation. There has been underinvestment in education for at least the past 10 years, with inadequate resource and capital budgets. That period has seen rising costs and sustained industrial action, as well as COVID and the impact that it has had on emotional health and well-being, along with rising levels and complexity of need among children and young people, all of which has had a very damaging impact.

The independent review of education, which was published recently, highlighted the need for proper investment in education in order to improve outcomes, reduce disadvantage and contribute to a stronger society and economy. There is a need for investment to address the outstanding industrial relations issues — I am aware that you had the Northern Ireland Teaching Council (NITC) in just before us — so that needs to include pay. Action short of strike over a protracted period has taken a significant toll. Morale amongst the teaching and non-teaching workforce is low, and although we have

maintained positive relationships with our trade union partners, we have been limited in the progress that we have been able to make in several important areas. Non-cooperation with school inspections, for example, is of particular concern and is having a detrimental impact on our collective efforts to empower improvement so that every child and young person can access high-quality learning opportunities.

We need sustained investment that allows us to plan effectively, provides fair and attractive pay packages for our teaching workforce and our vital school support staff, and supports a significant programme of professional development. That is critical to ensure that we can retain and develop our teaching profession and our support staff and ensure that they are rewarded and celebrated for the difference that they make to young people's lives.

We also need sustained capital investment. We have an ageing and dispersed schools estate and a 15-year backlog in planned maintenance. This year, our capital budget was cut by 9%, with no in-year funding made available, meaning that difficult decisions were required to manage our finances, including stopping all new major works, all new youth capital and all new school enhancement construction contracts. It is also vital that we get the necessary funding to complete the Strule education campus and that it is recommitted to the education sector and to the Strule project, which is an Executive and departmental priority.

In light of those significant challenges, we urgently need clarity on the financial package promised by the Secretary of State and on how that funding is to be allocated to ensure both stabilisation and future transformation. We have many challenges to overcome, but that has not prevented us from identifying opportunities and taking steps on an ambitious programme of transformation. The Department is progressing work on a range of areas for change, including the landscape review of the Education Authority (EA) and end-to-end reviews of school improvement and special educational needs.

First and, perhaps, most critically, we need to reposition education as a key pillar of our society and the economy. For many years, our education system has been applauded as world-leading, and there is no doubt that our young people continue to enjoy many of those benefits. However, we have significant problems, and we cannot take it for granted. We need continued, sustained investment to ensure the quality of experience for our children and young people today and to support our economic and social development goals in the longer term. Refocusing on the school improvement agenda is crucial for the Department, recognising that high-quality teaching and learning are fundamental to positive educational outcomes for our children and young people. The end-to-end review of school improvement will not only refresh the current school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, but, importantly, consider how we ensure that our curriculum is monitored, reviewed and delivered in an agile way that meets the needs of a changing economy and society. Running through the review will be a renewed focus on teacher professional learning, in recognition of the fact that the quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers. Recognising the professionalism of our teachers and building their knowledge and skills throughout their careers is an investment that we must make, if we are to safeguard the profession and ensure the best outcomes for our pupils.

The end-to-end review of special educational needs (SEN) is of particular strategic significance, given the increasing number of children presenting with special educational needs over recent years and the increasing complexity of those needs. The changing profile of the children and young people is a consequence of a number of factors and has highlighted the need for urgent reform across our system. The Department's ambitious reform agenda recognises that our children need to receive the right support at the right time from the right people in the right place. Sustained investment will be required to put in place an effective early intervention model that meets children's needs in a more responsive way; to develop a more comprehensive and ongoing programme of professional learning for our teaching and non-teaching staff, ensuring that our workforce is confident and capable to meet the changing needs of our children; and to ensure that our children receive the most appropriate placement to meet their needs.

Looking ahead, every transformational journey must start with a vision and a clear sense of direction. I firmly believe that we should have high aspirations for all children and young people, regardless of their ability or background, and ensure that their needs are foremost in all that we do. The Department's focus, therefore, is to put children and young people at the heart of everything that we do. We have an ambitious vision of every child and young person being happy, learning and succeeding. That vision is articulated in more detail in our recently published corporate plan, Every CHILD. The priorities are aligned with the areas that I have covered today. CHILD is an acronym: C is for championing all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects

of life; H is for helping all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being; I is for inspiring all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society; L is for meeting the learning needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential; and D is for delivering an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system. That will guide our transformation agenda as we look to make gains across each of those areas, including a more sustainable model of investment, fit-for-purpose support for children and young people and for the workforce and a built estate and an education system that work in harmony in the interests of our children and young people.

We must ensure that we have a curriculum that supports our children to navigate today's world and prepares them for the opportunities and challenges of tomorrow. It must be well implemented and kept under regular review. Aligned with that, we need a suite of qualifications that will ensure that our young people have clear pathways and opportunities to make an effective contribution to society and the economy. The return of Ministers and the Executive presents genuine and exciting opportunities to begin a journey of transformational change that will help to alleviate many of the challenges that we face. Working together, we can make a real difference.

In his first week in office, the Minister has highlighted his determination to resolve the teachers' pay dispute and commission a capital investment strategy so that children can be educated in schools that are comfortable and safe, of high quality and properly designed and resourced to support their learning. In addition, the Minister has submitted funding bids of £528 million to the Department of Finance to meet education capital needs next year. It was also emphasised that the Department requires, at minimum, an additional £100 million of capital above the draft Budget allocation to meet pressures relating to special educational needs placements. As a signal of his intent, the Minister has lifted the pause that had been imposed on new-build projects for seven of the schools on that list that are in the worst condition.

The independent review of education panel published its report on 13 December. It is timely that that has coincided with the return of the Executive. The review is extremely wide-ranging, covering almost every aspect of education, and we are assessing and considering the recommendations. We wish to discuss the report's recommendations with the Minister and build on the work that is already under way to shape a programme of transformation.

In addition, we have been working closely with the political parties on what a bespoke childcare offer for Northern Ireland should include. Significant work, informed by extensive stakeholder engagement, has been done to identify high-level options, and further early discussion on the way ahead will take place with the Minister.

It is clear that we have many challenges and opportunities across the education sector. Despite the challenges, there is great promise of positive transformation and progress. With the return of Ministers, we have the opportunity to deliver a significant reform programme that will have a positive impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of our pupils and ensure that every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, permanent secretary. It is apt that we had the NITC in, because many of the issues that you have raised were covered in a fair bit of detail in its presentation and the evidence session that followed. In some of the key challenges and issues, there was definitely a lot of correlation, but some of the emphases may have been slightly different, and perhaps we will pick up on that.

I want to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to ask questions about your presentation. I know that we will hear, as the weeks go on, a lot more detail on the specific policy areas, and we look forward to that detailed engagement.

I will ask two key questions about pay. The first is on the back of the briefing that we have just received from the NITC, and the second is on a different topic. It came through clearly in the NITC briefing that there is a positive feeling about the engagement and attempts to resolve the ongoing industrial dispute but real concern about some previous recommendations on workload review and how to address teachers' workload. There is a feeling that a lot of that work has been paused for a long period. Some of the recommendations were described as cost-neutral and not progressing. What work is going on in the Department, alongside that on pay — the Committee welcomes the fact that it looks as though there is resource to deal with that — to deal with those workload issues?

The second question is about the issue of non-teaching and support staff, which you raised. Over the past few days, probably every Committee member has been contacted by union members who seem to be deeply concerned that they may not be included in any pay negotiations. I am conscious that it is not, strictly speaking, a pay negotiation — it is a pay and grading review — but I would certainly welcome as detailed an update as you can give on where that sits and the likelihood of being able to deliver something, even if that is just to get the business case dealt with at Department of Finance level as a first action.

I will keep my questions to those two specifics, and other members may pick up the other areas of policy.

**Dr Browne:** Thank you for those questions, Chair. I will make an initial response, and Ronnie can pick up on some of the detail.

A range of workstreams was identified after the last pay agreement. The Department was working with its partners, including the trade unions, on a number of those workstreams. I think that there were nine workstreams in total, which looked at workload and a range of other issues. During COVID, that transformation had to be paused, but now we have brought those to a point where, we think, we can consider how best to take them forward.

The first priority has to be to sort out the pay dispute and remove the threat of strike action, which has a significant impact on children and young people, particularly on children with special educational needs. We also need to remove the action short of strike, which has been ongoing for over a year. A year or two before that, prior to COVID, there was a very extended period of action short of strike. There has been action short of strike for a significant proportion of the past eight to 10 years, to the point that many teachers who entered the profession during that period will not have operated under what were previously the accepted and normal teaching conditions. When I go out to schools and talk to principals and their senior management teams, they tell me that they are concerned about the extent to which significant numbers of relatively young — less so, as time goes on — teachers in the profession have not been in a position whereby they have taken forward their role in what would be considered to be the normal and accepted way.

Action short of strike has a corrosive effect on relationships within schools, between senior management and teachers and among the teachers themselves. It has an impact on children and young people and on what activities are available to them. It has an impact on the administrative arrangements for overseeing their work and for tracking and monitoring their progress. It has an impact on the returns that are made to the Department. Those returns may seem bureaucratic, but, given that they are the basis for assessing budgets, they are of extreme importance to schools and to us in the Department. They also provide the information that we need to know how schools are performing.

Another point about action short of strike is non-cooperation with inspection. We are the only part of these islands where it is possible for teachers not to cooperate with inspections. That means that, for the extended period that I talked about, we have not got the information that we would have expected to get from the inspectorate on what has been happening in our schools and what the issues are in our system. That is a serious issue.

Those are the high-level points in response to your question. I am sure that Ronnie can fill you in on some of the detail relating to the other questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I will just respond to that quickly. The key theme of the briefing that we just had from the NITC was that pay is absolutely central. I think that there is agreement on that, and there seems to be a collective view that it is in everyone's interests to bring an end to action short of strike.

I raised the issue of the workload review. In the short term, there are issues with recurring budgets to cover ongoing pay claims. We do not want to see industrial action further down the line if we do not deal with the workload issues, given that there had been an expectation, a number of years ago, that that was all in train and would progress. It is about making sure that we do not focus entirely on pay and then assume that the job is done on industrial relations.

**Mr Ronnie Armour (Department of Education):** In fairness, Chair, we will not do that. We recognise that pay is the key issue. It is urgent and needs to be dealt with in a speedy way. There are really

positive relationships between the unions and management side, despite the challenges. It is positive that we now have a remit within which to negotiate. Those negotiations have started, but they are sensitive, so I will not go into detail.

As Mark indicated, there have been nine reviews of the workload. I think that eight of those have been completed. Something in the region of 279 recommendations have flowed from those reviews. It would be wrong to suggest that nothing has been happening. A lot of activity has been going on across management side, and we will get into discussions and negotiations about the recommendations with our trade union partners. In your opening remarks, Chair, you indicated that some of those can be implemented at no cost or low cost; other recommendations will involve funding, which we do not have over and above what is in the pay remit. We will certainly get into the detail of all that with the unions and try to negotiate the way forward. Undoubtedly, you are right in saying that strike action and action short of strike need to be brought to an end. We need a long-term sustainable pathway forward so that we do not end up in a similar situation again, having come through all that we have come through.

**Dr Browne:** And on non-teaching staff?

**Mr Armour:** We are still working on the business case for the non-teaching staff with our colleagues in DOF and the Education Authority. We are talking about a significant amount of money that is needed to implement the pay and grading review. It is a complex and challenging business case, but the Minister met the trade union representatives yesterday and gave them the commitment that we will push ahead to get the business case finalised as quickly as possible. We will then need to make a case for the funding for that, which we do not currently have and which has not been budgeted for in our provision.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you for your update. I add to my initial comments that progress on that is essential. I know that what happens beyond making a decision on the business case at the Department of Finance is out of your hands at this stage, but getting to that point at least is critical, and whatever work the Department needs to engage in with the Department of Finance I urge you to do.

Frustration among the non-teaching unions is at an all-time high. They feel frustrated that it has taken so long to get to this point. I think that they felt that it was ready to go years ago, and they feel, even over the past year, that it has been sitting at departmental level for some time. It is important to understand that, as far as I can see, if it is not resolved, we are looking at a protracted period of industrial action, and the system cannot cope with that. I know that you are well aware of those issues, but it is important to record that we are in a dangerous situation with the system's ability to cope with a protracted period of industrial action by those staff.

**Dr Browne:** Let me respond to that quickly. We absolutely agree. I do not even like the term "non-teaching staff". Other support staff are critical to schools, and we want to arrive at a fair resolution. I do not accept the position that it has been sitting with the Department for a long time. There has been an ongoing process between the EA and the unions, with them consequently providing the business case to us. Because of the significant amounts of money that are involved, the Department rightly has to scrutinise the business case, and, in turn, the Department of Finance will scrutinise the assumptions that the Department makes. That is only right and proper. As part of any business-case process, there is always going to be checking assumptions and data. That is ongoing, and a number of issues still need to be flushed through.

It is not the case that a final, perfect business case arrived and the Department has sat on it or that it has been put to the Department of Finance and it has said, "This may be fine, but we are not going to do it". Extra work needs to be done to clarify the business case and the figures and to test some of the assumptions before it can be accepted. The Education Committee and other public representatives, I am sure, would not expect anything different, given the amount of money that is involved.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Absolutely. Whatever the history of how we arrived here, and there may be different versions of that —

**Dr Browne:** There always are.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** — it is imperative that it progresses as quickly as it can. Thank you for that.

**Mr Sheehan:** You are all welcome. I will start with a couple of quick-fire questions. Feel free to give a yes or no answer. Are there any plans to put the holiday food grant on a statutory basis?

**Dr Browne:** I rarely give yes or no answers, as you probably know from my previous appearances at Committee. The school holiday food grants were a really important Executive initiative. They were funded centrally and administered by the Department on behalf of the Executive because the administrative systems that were required to deliver those grants were available in the Education Authority as it pays for free school meals and therefore the capacity was there. It is not purely an Education initiative; it is an anti-poverty initiative, and it was funded by the Executive. Ending it was one of the hardest decisions that I had to take. It ended, not because of any doubt over its value or importance, but because the money was not made available. The money that had been made available from the centre was not made available to the Department, and we could not divert educational funding for something that was not an educational initiative and that had been funded centrally. Had that money continued, the initiative would have continued.

If the Executive believe that it remains a priority and will provide the funding, we are absolutely happy, in the short term, to continue to administer it. In the longer term, it is something that we need to discuss with the Department for Communities to see where it should properly sit and ask how it sits with things like an anti-poverty strategy.

That is a long way of saying, "Yes, if the money comes."

**Mr Sheehan:** Fair enough. When will the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals and school uniform grants be completed?

**Dr Browne:** Quite a lot of work has been done with the stakeholder groups to look at the options. That work is reasonably advanced, but we have to discuss with the Minister whether the aim is to go out to consultation on that issue. We have not taken that to the point of consultation: at a time when there were no Ministers and the budgets were in such a severe state, there would have been no point. However, we will want to discuss that with the Minister in the near future because the work is pretty far advanced. We have a reasonably clear idea of the options, and there will be an opportunity for consultation and consideration on which of those, if any, can be afforded. "In the near future", is the answer to that.

**Mr Sheehan:** I understand that it is early days yet. I suppose I will get a similar answer about the school sports programme. Are there plans to reintroduce that?

**Dr Browne:** The school sports programme takes us into curriculum issues. As part of the funding pressures that we faced, which were severe, we had to look at all of our funding and try to protect what we regard as core funding.

PE is a core part of the curriculum and is delivered by teachers in the main. That is their role and function. We provided extra funding to a number of sports organisations to come in and provide additional support to deliver programmes, which is what you are referring to. Given the choices that we had to make, we were not able to continue that funding.

Our view remains that key delivery of the curriculum is for teachers. We need to support teachers to deliver the curriculum more effectively if there are some concerns or a lack of confidence among teachers about their capacity to do that. It would then be up to schools to decide, over and beyond that, whether they wish to spend some of their funding on bringing in additional support.

If we get a good settlement and the money is available to bring in the sports programme, we can consider that. However, we would have to set it alongside what we see as the core responsibilities of teachers and whether that is a priority for us.

**Mr Sheehan:** Fair enough. Has any work been done on workforce planning in the Irish-medium sector? You will be aware that there is a supply problem with teachers in the Irish-medium sector.

**Dr Browne:** Yes, there has. We are in close consultation with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) on a range of issues in the Irish-medium sector. There are some tricky issues in the Irish-medium sector, and the supply of teachers is one of them. We have maintained the places that are available for initial teacher training. There is a range of issues that come into play when teachers take up those

initial training places but do not stay in the sector. Some are trained and then go abroad or into the English-medium sector.

There are complex issues that we are trying to work through with CnaG. We are keen to find some resolution to them. We are open and are working with CnaG to find the solutions to that. It is a tricky problem, and it is not due to any lack of effort or willingness on the part of the Department. It is one of those issues about supply, attraction and the extent to which individuals come forward for that training and then stay in the sector.

**Mr Sheehan:** Fair enough. My final question is on an issue that I raised with you prior to the publishing of the independent review panel's report. I had flagged with you that I had spoken to the chairperson of the panel, who had indicated that the panel did not believe that educational underachievement here was any higher than it was anywhere else on these islands. He conceded at the launch of the report that we lag behind the South, but it is important to establish whether we have higher rates of educational underachievement here than other places do. All the evidence suggests that we do. The recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) comparative study of the education systems North and South suggested that we have far higher numbers of young people leaving school without qualifications and far fewer young people going on to third-level education. Previous reports also flagged that up. It is important because, if we accept that there are not higher rates of underachievement, it affects how funding is delivered. However, if we accept the contrary — that there are higher levels — that also affects how funding is delivered. What is your view on that?

**Dr Browne:** I know that you raised it with the chair of the independent panel. The comments that the panel made are its comments. That is the panel's assessment of the data; it is not our assessment of the data. I know that he gave you a response at that time.

Our view is that we have significant problems with underachievement. I will ask Linsey to talk about some of the things that we are doing around that. We have a persistent gap between those who are on free school meals and those who are not. We have a range of policies that are designed to close that gap as far as we can. The association between lower socio-economic status or income and achievement is not an issue that is particular to Northern Ireland — it is worldwide — but we want to close that gap as much as we can and to mitigate the things that impact on that. We have a raft of policies that are there to try to do that. It is a key priority for us. We recognise that it is a significant and enduring issue.

It is an issue that has been exacerbated by COVID. Those who have been impacted most by COVID are those who are from disadvantaged circumstances. The tentative information that we have is that the position has become worse. This is at a time when, because of budgetary constraints, we have had to stop some of the special initiatives that there were post COVID, such as the Engage programme and Healthy Happy Minds, because we did not have the funding for them. We have not been able to put those measures in place. We have a real concern about the fact that not only do we have that gap but that gap is widening. We need to take action or we will lose a generation of children.

Is there anything that you want to add, Linsey?

**Mrs Linsey Farrell (Department of Education):** Yes. I will build on the comments that Mark has made. The research and evidence is clear about the links between socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment and disadvantage. As Mark said, that has been compounded, obviously, by the cost-of-living crisis and the ongoing legacy of the pandemic. When we visit schools, we consistently hear about children who come to school not ready to learn because of the range of barriers that they face in their life. Those often come from their home situation or the community and the disadvantage that they face. It is a significant priority for the Department.

You will be aware that the Fair Start programme has been in operation. Due to the budgetary pressures, we have not been able to put the resource to it to match the ambition of the panel when it first set out that programme of work. Nevertheless, we have been delivering that programme on a much-reduced scale within the resources that were available, including the roll-out of digital devices to a range of young people in multiple deprived areas. We have also been looking at key aspects of that in terms of SEN, including the early years SEN inclusion service, and developing and enhancing that. A range of actions are being taken forward through that Fair Start programme, but we recognise that the scale of the ambition that was laid out in that programme required significant sustained investment. As Mark said in his opening comments, that investment just has not been with us in the



Education budget, but it will be required to address the issues that were raised. We continue to feel that it is important that they are tackled.

There were key actions in that report around our reducing educational disadvantage programme. We are keen to develop proposals around that that take a locality-based approach and focus on areas of particular disadvantage and educational disadvantage. That will allow us an opportunity to really home in on the range of issues. Let us be honest: the response to this is not only an Education response. It requires cross-departmental collaboration and pooling resources to effect the change, because the reality for many children is that they face barriers to their learning and to engaging in education that result from other factors in their lives. We really need to wrap around those children through that cross-departmental approach.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for that. No doubt we will talk about that more.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you all for being here. I welcome the conversation starting about pay. Recently, I spoke with Unite the union about the role of classroom assistants in particular. Specifically in our special schools, they are so much more than academic support; they help with hygiene and health. It is great to see that conversation taking place today.

I have two questions. The first is about Irish-medium education. Last year, I visited the Gaelcholáiste Dhoire in Dungiven and got a really good, comprehensive view of Irish-medium education. It is hugely positive to see the growth in that sector, but I also became aware of some of the challenges. An issue that I have become aware of is that there is a lack of fluent Irish speakers to grade the papers of Irish-medium students. We have a situation in which people who have English as their first language are marking the exams of Irish-speaking students in subjects such as history and music. We know that context can be lost through poorly translated papers. I am curious and would love to know more about that. Maybe it is something that you are aware of, and, if so, what can be done to rectify it?

**Dr Browne:** It is one of a number of issues that we have. I mentioned it in response to Pat's question on the Irish-medium sector, which had to do with the supply of people with the right skills in the right areas to deal with the issues. Linsey, do you want to pick up on that issue?

**Mrs Farrell:** Certainly. Cara, as Mark said, a range of issues face the Irish-medium sector. We have been engaging regularly with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on the curriculum and examinations. The particular issue you raise, that of examiners, is part of a wider problem with the ability to attract examiners to examine and mark exams. That is part of a wider challenge and work that we have ongoing with CCEA. As you rightly say, those issues are compounded in the Irish-medium sector. I have no answer to give you today. We are working closely with CCEA and the Irish-medium team in the Department to develop a response to that. There are also issues with the resources. We are trying to look at those more strategically with the Irish-medium sector to bring forward some potential responses.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome that. I am mindful of one example: a student who, in Irish, was used to getting As and Bs and whose mark went down to, I believe, a C or D. I appreciate that something is ongoing to tackle that issue.

I will move on. You have already answered the question about special educational needs, but this is about challenges outside the classroom that our young people face. Last year, I met children who are carers. I heard their stories about how their caring responsibilities in the home often negatively shaped their academic experience and achievement. Does the Department keep any statistics on how many pupils in the education system are carers? Are there any ideas as to how the Department could increase support for carers? One example that popped up from children who are carers was that they might be given an opportunity at the start of each school year to declare quietly that they are a carer. That could maybe run on to children being able to talk about what was going on in the home by noting it down on paper for the teacher. They may be a child of addiction, for example. It would give teachers an understanding of what is going on when the child is not in the classroom and, maybe, how it shapes their academic achievement. That is my final question. If you have anything on that, it would be helpful.

**Dr Browne:** The Department engaged in a recent initiative on children who are carers with those who work with children and young people in the sector on that very issue. I do not think that we have statistics. I need to check, but I do not think that we carry statistics on the numbers who are carers. However, one of the recommendations from that initiative is that it is important that schools ensure

that they are aware of any pupils coming in who have caring responsibilities. Schools would therefore be able to make staff aware of that should certain issues present, whether it is to do with punctuality, homework not being done, children being upset or needing time off. The first thing is that the school needs to be aware that they have caring responsibilities.

Other aspects of the initiative related to raising awareness among children and young people of the fact that children can be carers in the first place. It also looked at the extent to which, where children are carers, they might have the opportunity to be made known to one another to have the opportunity to share experiences, share the difficulties that they have and share solutions or just find friendships and support from their peers. A pack was pulled together and was launched about a month ago. We can get you details of that, Cara. I cannot remember all the precise details now, but there was a launch associated with that, and there has been a campaign. I wrote to all school principals with the details of it, encouraging them to take those steps and signposting them to the materials that had been developed.

**Ms Hunter:** Brilliant. Thank you very much.

**Mrs Mason:** Thanks for coming along today. I am really glad to hear that the Minister has, in these very early days, recognised the childcare issue and, of course, the strategy. Through engagement, probably through the Executive Office in the past few months, I am aware that there is a very small team in the Department working on that. Quite a lot of information on the costed options has been pulled together. Is there any form of commitment to putting more resources towards that to expedite this, given its urgency? Is there a possibility of getting an update on that strategy? If you cannot facilitate that right now, could we, as a Committee, as a matter of urgency, have information on those costed options and where we are with that?

The impact that affordable and quality childcare has not only on the child but on families and the economy is well rehearsed. It is also a gender-equality issue. While I appreciate that it is early days, given the impact of the cost-of-living crisis of the past few years has had on our childcare providers — we see the pressures that they face and see that there are more pressures coming down the road towards them — are there any plans for some sort of interim funding for those guys?

During COVID, an excellent forum was set up for ongoing stakeholder engagement in that area. The feedback that I got from the sector was that it was effective in identifying issues immediately and that the Department was able to then put measures in place to address them. Has the Minister given any indication of bringing that back for now, to address the immediate issues that those guys are having?

**Dr Browne:** Thanks very much for that. I will let Ronnie answer. He has been working on it, and he can pick up on the responses.

**Mr Armour:** Thank you for the acknowledgement of the work that has been going on. You are absolutely right to say that it is a very small team. It has done a huge amount of work to get us to where we are now around the costed options. We are now talking to the Minister about those, and you are aware from the Minister's statement of how he plans to take it forward. You are equally right to say that we will need more resourcing. We are trying to secure that resource because there is a huge amount of work that needs to be done. Our priority at the moment is looking at affordability and sustainability, the two issues that you have touched on. We are looking to see whether there are interim things that we might be able to do, now that we have a Minister and Executive in place. The Minister will hope to bring forward proposals to the Executive around that development work.

I will be back next week, and we will give you a more detailed briefing around where we are with the childcare strategy, if you are happy with that. I can assure you that the Minister has been clear with us about the urgency and the need to drive forward and to build on the work that we have been doing. We are not starting from a bad place. A lot of work has been done, and that is positive. We absolutely welcome the stakeholder engagement. We have a stakeholder forum that last met, I think, just before Christmas, and we have plans to have further meetings with that group as we develop. Listening to lived experiences is vital for us in developing what we seek to develop.

**Ms Brownlee:** Thank you very much for the update. For me, a significant proportion of children and young people in Northern Ireland are experiencing mental health problems and self-harm. I come to the Committee as an MLA and as the parent of a child in first year, and I see more and more the serious implications of social media: self-harm and mental health problems in young people. I have seen methods of best practice in a lot of the schools in my area. Will increased funding be made

available for schools to ensure that they have continual access to counsel and support and, of course, support for teachers, particularly in times of crisis for young people?

I have another three questions, but I will go through them quickly. Also linked to mental health is physical activity, which helps to promote health and well-being. I noticed that the previous Committee raised the inconsistency in physical education and outdoor exercise and the fact that the two-hour minimum requirement was not being met. Has the Department addressed this, and will it take any action?

We could spend a week on special educational needs. One of my questions is on the NI Audit Office report in, I think, 2020: have any of the recommendations from that report been implemented, recently or since that report was issued? If so, what were they?

Cathy stole my question on the childcare strategy. The strategy is absolutely key. I welcome the Minister being so upfront and putting resources and action towards it. It is absolutely key that we move this forward as soon as possible. I welcome that there will be an update for the Committee next week. That is it.

**Dr Browne:** Linsey will pick up on your questions, Cheryl.

**Mrs Farrell:** On your first point about emotional health and well-being, Cheryl, we totally agree. When we visit schools, it is one of the most significant issues that come up. We have also had a lot of direct engagement with young people, and they pointed to what they see as a pandemic of emotional health and well-being issues as a result of pressures of social media etc, as you mentioned. We are very conscious of those pressures on our young people.

You will be aware of the emotional health and well-being framework that we fund along with our colleagues in the Department of Health. That encapsulates a range of supports for schools. We accept, however, that a lot of those are pilots and are nowhere near to meeting all of the need. You will also be aware that the Healthy Happy Minds pilot has been evaluated. Our Minister is considering the findings of that evaluation as part of shaping a future response. Post-primary counselling support remains in place. The existing contract runs until August this year, so the EA is going through the process of putting that out to tender.

None of that negates the need for us to do further work around this. I mentioned that we have been engaging specifically with young people. You might have seen recently the logo that young people designed for the emotional health and well-being framework. The youth voice played into that. We are working with young people and our stakeholder group on what more can be done and what levers are open to us. One of the issues that have been raised with us is how our curriculum, for example, plays into emotional health and well-being.

There are many issues that we need to look at, including primary-school counselling and the extension of post-primary counselling. Also, fundamentally, we need to look at how we build the emotional health and well-being and resilience of our children and young people from the earliest stage through all stages of school. We are keen to continue to engage on that with stakeholders, the mental health commissioner and young people themselves.

Your second point was about PE and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) evaluation that raised a number of issues, including the fact that the vast majority of schools were not providing those two hours. It made a range of recommendations. In response, our curriculum team has established a task and finish group in the Department to bring together the various aspects of the Department that play into that space. The ETI's recommendations were around the physical capacity of many schools to offer PE and the confidence and capability of teachers. There were issues around teacher professional learning and the curriculum content. The work of that task and finish group is ongoing. I will be able to provide a further, more detailed update when I am before the Committee in two weeks' time. I will be able to go into more detail about the specific workstreams then.

On your third point, you are right that we could spend a whole day and more talking about special educational needs. Again, we will be able to get into much more detail about that when I am back here in two weeks. However, I will pick up on your specific question: yes, the Northern Ireland Audit Office produced a report with a range of recommendations. Since that, there have been other scrutiny reports with other recommendations. You may be aware that the Department recently initiated an end-to-end review of special educational needs, which, despite its name, is not another review of the issues. It seeks to bring shape to the Department's response to the now more than 200

recommendations about special educational needs. Many of those recommendations have been responded to through the various workstreams that the end-to-end review is picking up, but that analysis seeks to summarise all those recommendations. That has taken us to what Mark talked about at the beginning: right support, right time, right people, right place. Following on from our analysis through the end-to-end review and informed by the feedback from that, the Minister will seek to bring forward a more detailed implementation plan and to set out a transformation plan for the range of things that need to be done to respond to the recommendations and, importantly, to transform services for children.

**Ms Brownlee:** I appreciate that and welcome all your updates; they are very positive. It is great to see that the Department is taking such a proactive approach to that and moving it forward in the right way. I look forward to the next few weeks: we will be busy. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Cheryl. Yes, it is welcome that further, in-depth updates are scheduled on some of those areas. We look forward to those.

**Mr Baker:** I will follow on from what Cheryl said about special educational needs. I know that a lot of work is ongoing, but we will shortly be back to the issue of placements for children. I can only go by what I know from my constituency office, but the challenges from the last couple of years have not even been worked out. It is about reducing the barriers to getting children into a school. Many children who should be in a special school are put into a mainstream school, because there is no place for them. That comes down to capacity. Children are then faced with reduced timetables, and we would all say that that is just unacceptable. What can happen, in the here and now, to alleviate some of the concerns that families will have when they apply for places in the next couple of months? What can we do so that we do not have a repeat of how bad it was last year? As I said, we are still working through that.

**Mrs Farrell:** Thank you for your question, Danny. Yes, since 2020, the number of children with statements of special educational needs who require placements has been rising rapidly. Last year, we saw a huge increase in those numbers and in the complexity of the needs that children were displaying. There was a particular hike in the number in early years, which may point to the impact of the pandemic in terms of early childhood developmental milestones perhaps not being met. Health visiting was not happening during that time, which would have had an impact on the development of children.

Looking at the census data in the Department, we forecast that the number of children with statements of SEN is due to increase, year on year, until 2032. We are looking at a changing profile of pupil population, and the challenge for us is how to pivot to meet the needs of that changing pupil profile. Last year, there was the huge increase in that number and the challenge of finding placements for those children. In recognition of that and in preparation for it, we have been leading a strategic group on SEN placements. It has been meeting since October or November of last year. Where placements would previously have been planned in the preceding months, that work has been ongoing to try to get ahead of the numbers and the data.

That having been said, the numbers that are coming through already and that the EA is predicting still look particularly challenging. We put in, I think, 94 or 95 specialist provisions in mainstream education last year. It is looking as though we will need an additional 70 or so this year. We are therefore working intensively with the Education Authority to understand what the data is telling us in order to identify the areas of geographic pressure. Investment will be required, and the capital investment to put in the specialist provisions will be required urgently.

It is not just a matter of physical space. If we go back to the right support, right time, right people, right place, we need to ensure that schools are supported to meet the needs of those children. Again, investment will be required for teacher professional learning and to ensure appropriate resourcing for specialist provisions in mainstream education. There is no doubt that there is a challenge with the numbers, but the Minister has given his commitment. He is prioritising it. It is a matter of significant priority for the Department and the Education Authority, but we urgently need to get ahead of the numbers and understand the data.

For longer-term planning, we need to work more closely with the Department of Health on what data we can get at an earlier stage to be able to do some longer-term projections and modelling to help us. If we know that numbers will increase until 2032, we need to get under the numbers to understand the profile of that need and how our system can best pivot to meet the needs of the children.

**Mr Baker:** I was about to ask about that cooperation with the Department of Health. Along with early intervention, that will be key. Before I move on to youth provision, did you mention an extra 70 provisions?

**Mrs Farrell:** At this point, that is an estimate.

**Mr Baker:** Do you know how many nurseries will be lost? That was a problem as well, because, when schools were taken on as satellites, nurseries were closed down. Will it be the same?

**Mrs Farrell:** No. We are working closely with the EA to analyse the data and the stage that it is at: is it at early years or at transition into year 9? We are just looking at all of that at the minute, Danny. We would not want to be in a position again in which we prioritise one set of children over another. Difficult judgements have to be made at times, however, because we want to make sure that children are placed and placed in an appropriate place with the right support.

**Mr Baker:** I appreciate that. I will jump to a different area and ask whether it is possible for the Department to review the funding model for youth clubs in the community and voluntary sector. About 18 months ago, we saw the £136,000 to run youth clubs drop to £96,000 because of a change in the funding specifications. The most alarming thing for me as an elected representative was how the EA was not only the funder of the voluntary sector but a collaborator, assessor and monitor. That is not fair.

I see the good work that the community and voluntary sector does. Do not get me wrong: I know how great youth workers are in the statutory sector as well. It is just that the burden was then stretched. In West Belfast, we lost an outreach team. From the pilot, the evidence of the great work that it had done was there. Further down the line, we will see the implications of losing that great detached and outreach team. It was probably stopping young people from offending and entering the judicial system, so how much will taking it away cost down the line? There is a body of work on youth services on which all Departments can cooperate.

It is about the review of the specifications. We have had correspondence today from St Malachy's Youth Centre, but it could have been from any youth club in the community and voluntary sector because of what youth clubs now face as a result of the reduction in funding. They are having to move from full-time hours to part-time hours. Youth leaders have additional administrative pressures to find additional funding and work through the specifications. When those specifications came out, the local advisory groups (LAGs) and the regional advisory groups (RAGs) were also chaired by the EA. That has changed, but that was another problem that definitely came from the specifications when they were released. It would be good if the Department could review how that is carried out, going forward.

**Mrs Farrell:** Thank you, Danny. You raise issues about youth services of which we are very well aware. Over the past year to 18 months, following the issues that emerged with the funding model, the Department has become closely involved. As a result, we have initiated a review of the policy framework for youth provision. 'Priorities for Youth' had been in place for some time, and it was clear that there were differing interpretations in the youth sector of its implementation. The Department has therefore started work on the review of the policy. The EA is also looking at the issues that the voluntary and community sector specifically has raised. Aligned with the review of the policy will be the need to review the funding delivery model. It is important that any funding delivery model closely aligns with the policy intent set out in the policy document, so it is really important that anything that is set out in the policy be delivered through an effective delivery model.

You mentioned the LAGs and the RAGs. Before a full review of the funding delivery model, there were shorter-term actions that could be implemented in the interim to improve relationships across the sector. They have included looking at the membership and chairmanship of the regional advisory groups and local advisory groups. We are also looking at the methodology for how need is assessed and how that then plays into funding decisions. There is a range of issues to be looked at, and they will be looked at during a review of that funding delivery model, which must be aligned with the policy.

You also mentioned the role of other Departments, and you are right: youth services can often be funded from a range of Departments. In turn, Departments benefit from the amazing work that youth workers do. Those benefits are clear and include benefits to the economy, education, justice and the community. In the light of that, we have pulled together a cross-departmental group on youth work. It has met once. I chair that group, which is made up of senior officials from other Departments. Again, we want to use that group to inform our policy review and to get a sense of what is happening with

youth services across Departments and do a stocktake. We are making those connections at a cross-departmental level.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Before I bring in David, I have a comment. A number of questions have focused on special educational needs, and I know that you will present on that in a couple of weeks. I do not think that you will have any issue with the Committee supporting transformation work on early intervention and the early identification of needs, but it is really important to get it clearly on the record that there is a lot of anxiety among parents who are looking at places in those key transition years coming up in September, particularly given what happened with the preschool situation the previous time around. Danny is absolutely right: anyone who works in a constituency office knows that the volume of queries received was substantial. As a Committee, we just want to impress on you how vital it is that we get appropriate places for those children. I know that a huge amount of work was done to get children into placements, but there is definitely a question mark over whether all those places were appropriate or appropriately resourced and over whether the schools were appropriately equipped to meet the children's needs. I emphasise that the work on the long-term transformation is welcome.

I also highlight the point that, in some of the messaging from the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, there was a real concern about some specialist provisions in mainstream settings not being properly supported to meet children's needs, with schools not feeling equipped to deal with that. On behalf of the Committee, I put it on the record that, because of the short-term pressures — I know that you are aware of them, and we know the amount of work that is going into this — there is a huge amount of anxiety out there, and none of us wants to see a repeat of what we had last year.

**Mr Brooks:** Thanks very much for your presentation. It is great to hear such agreement around the table on some of the priorities and on what the Committee wants to see, but I am hearing clearly in response that the resourcing needs to match those ambitions. Without resourcing, they are just a wish list, and many of them will be undeliverable. I think back to last year, when I met the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). As part of trying to get us back to this place, and it was very much selling the land of milk and honey — the transformation of our health and education services — that could be provided if only we would come back here. That is why we argued for that genuine, needs-based funding for Northern Ireland. That is important for you and your priorities as well as for the other Departments. I hope that the British Government will take that on board, but I also hope that the ambition around this table for the delivery of those departmental and ministerial priorities is matched by the voices from the parties around the Executive table when it comes to prioritising education and the future of our children, in terms of what the Finance Minister and the Executive can provide.

I will move on to another couple of issues. First, will you comment on what the Department is seeking to do for parents on the affordability of school uniforms and some of the barriers that those from less-well-off backgrounds face in providing a good education for their children and in making sure that their children do not feel set apart from the rest of the school in that regard?

Secondly, on school transport, I have been aware not only as an MLA now but working in the background previously of cases where the policies on the provision of school transport for those who require it have been very rigid and, at times, completely lacking in any common sense, compassion, understanding or empathy. The school transport policy, which we are all aware of and have dealt with in the past, is that the child must be attending the closest school in order for transport to be provided, I recall a case where a child was deemed to be in need of school transport, but it was argued that they would have to move school — a distance of 20 to 30 metres. It blew my mind that we were having an argument about such a distance, when the disruption for that child, had they followed that through in order to facilitate the policy, would have been very significant. Yet, I would imagine, there would have been no cost difference in the journey to one school or the other. I understand that, in legal terms, sometimes, policies need to be rigid to some degree, but does the Department intend to review that and bring in an element of common sense?

**Dr Browne:** Thanks very much, David. I will pick up those questions. The Department has been taking forward a review of school uniforms, looking at what was taken forward in England, which has had mixed results. We have looked at what is happening in Scotland, and, in fact, we have agreement from a Scottish academic to help us with that review and to bring the experience from Scotland into play. We have consulted a range of schools and have developed some outline proposals.

This always appears to be a simple issue to deal with, but it quickly gets complicated. We are very much aware of the fact that it can be a barrier to children even applying to schools. It is an issue that

can put families into debt, and it causes great anxiety to a range of families. Therefore, it is something of importance, and the Minister is keen to see the proposal that we will have and to see what can be done.

One of the things that, we know, might help is the extent to which all items of uniform have to be branded. Is that really necessary? Do there have to be single suppliers? Can there be competition? Why can there not be accommodation for polo tops or jogging bottoms or whatever to be bought from the local supermarket? Why do they have to come from a particular supplier? We need to look at all those things. It is often suggested that we just put a cap on costs, but doing that takes you into all sorts of issues about interfering in the private sector and interfering with the right to trade etc. It is complex, and it would need to be kept under perpetual review. We need to find a way through those processes. They are complex, but there are things that we can do.

The other point is that uniform policy is a matter for boards of governors. It is their responsibility. Boards of governors can decide to remove all the barriers, if they so choose. The guidance from the Department — I wrote to them about this last year to reinforce it — is that school governors should exercise their discretion in determining what are deemed to be essential items of uniform and how schools police, to use that term, or oversee the extent to which children conform to uniform policy. I made the point that children should not in any sense be excluded from or deprived of education as a consequence of an inability to pay for a school uniform. That is all down to the policy of boards of governors, and it is already open to them to make all those decisions. In reality, those decisions are not being taken — they are in some schools but not in others — and that is where the pressures come. We hope to have a discussion with the Minister in the near future. We need to do further work to refine the proposals, and, at that point, I hope that we will come forward with proposals to start to deal with the issue. I caution that, although it appears straightforward on the surface, when you get into it, it is slightly more complex. It is important that action be taken.

Some years ago, I was responsible for school transport — I suppose that I am still responsible for it, but I was in that specific sector — and I used to wonder, "What goes on in school transport? It cannot be that complicated". School transport generates, possibly, more judicial reviews (JRs) than any other aspect of education policy. As you say, the rules are complex. They have arisen because of the complexity of the other policies that school transport supports. Ultimately, school transport is there to support parental preference, so that, where a parent expresses a preference for a child to go to a school that is beyond walking distance and that preference is met, the child is able to access the school. That is what school transport is about.

Unfortunately, in hard-edged situations in which eligibility has to be clearly determined, a matter of metres or even less than that, at times, can determine whether someone falls inside the line of eligibility for transport. You can get into what appears to be — I do not know the details of what you described — a ridiculous situation. However, a policy that is based on such hard criteria can become impossible to implement if you do not have those hard criteria. All that having been said, the policy contains elements of discretion to try to deal with the particular circumstances that can emerge, in order to avoid the absurdities that you described. That discretion is there to be exercised by the EA in response to particular circumstances. There is an opportunity for people to appeal decisions and set out those circumstances. Although there is discretion, that can be judicially reviewed because it gets into the issue of consistent exercise of discretion. If you have discretion, you must exercise it, but, when you exercise it in one case and a similar case emerges, you must exercise it in the right way in that case, or you will be open to JR. Even having that discretion does not get you away from the problems; you still have to manage that.

Are there things that we could do? I am sure that there are. The first is to see to what extent we can be more compassionate in trying to avoid the more absurd decisions that are taken and allowing some flexibility, while guarding ourselves against a series of judicial reviews, which are very expensive. The other point is that expenditure on transport is in the region of, I think, £110 million a year. A lot of money is involved in it, it is expensive, and we need to manage the budget effectively. The rules on eligibility are there to make sure that those who, the Assembly has determined, should get the support get it. It can create problems, but that is the issue with eligibility.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you. You will be relieved to know that you are off the hook for now. Thank you all for your time and for attending Committee. As I said, we look forward to scrutinising all the policy areas in a lot more detail in the weeks to come.

**Dr Browne:** Thank you, Chair.