



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Independent Review
of Education Panel

12 June 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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:

Dr Keir Bloomer	Independent Review of Education
Ms Marie Lindsay	Independent Review of Education
Sir Gerry Loughran	Independent Review of Education
Mr Robin McLoughlin	Independent Review of Education
Ms Isabel Nisbet	Independent Review of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I welcome, in person, Sir Gerry Loughran, Marie Lindsay and Robin McLoughlin and, remotely via Zoom, Dr Keir Bloomer, the chairperson of the panel, and Isabel Nisbet. Thank you for joining us: it is great to have you here again and, hopefully, we will have an opportunity to go into a little more detail on some of the issues that we began looking at last week. We agreed that this week, in this session, we would look specifically at the issues of early years, childcare and socio-economic deprivation and educational underachievement as the key areas of focus. Members will want to question the panel on those issues in more detail.

I am happy to hand over to the panel for an initial presentation, however long or short you wish it to be but up to 10 minutes, in which to make your opening remarks, after which we will move to questions and answers. We have a slightly lighter agenda today, so we will look to members having seven minutes for each enquiry. If we start to get tight for time, we may have to look at that. I will hand over to the panel: I do not know who wants to lead on the initial part.

Sir Gerry Loughran (Independent Review of Education): Thank you, Chair. We noted the subjects that you want to chat to us about. The five of us had a meeting about your agenda and discussed the ways in which we might deal with the specific questions that you want to raise on those subjects. We are happy to deal with any other matters relating to the report at the same time. The three areas that you mentioned are, of course, of real significance, and we dealt with them in some detail in our report. Each of them covers quite a span. Under transitions, for example, we deal with everything from infants up to the move into third-level education and, indeed, beyond that. Transitions range from moving into

primary school and moving from primary into post-primary school to moving into third-level education. For pupils with special educational needs (SEN), particularly those in special schools, the transitions often do not exist. The Committee would probably agree that there is a vacuum; whose responsibility it is in the departmental structure is arguable. We are more than happy to take each of those subjects in whatever order you wish, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is great. I will kick off. I want to start at the beginning of the process. It is clear from all our deliberations in Committee and from your report that there is a significant connection between educational disadvantage and investing in early years. If we are to do one, we really need to do the other. If we are to make quality investment in provision at that end, that is where it will be most effective in tackling the attainment gap. It is the area where the cross-cutting responsibilities of Health and Education are probably most prevalent. I do not need to rehearse them all, but we have health visiting; we have the regulation of early years settings; we have all the child health reviews; and we have the Department's responsibility for preschool education. All those interlink. Given the importance that your report attaches to investment in early years, what is your view on the key areas where Health and Education need to do better in working together? Do the departmental structures for how we operate the system help or hinder collaborative working?

Sir Gerry Loughran: We will deal with that, Chair, but, before dealing with the specific matter of collaboration, I will mention what will be a golden thread in our responses this afternoon: money is a problem. I do not need to underline that. Think, for example, about the services that are provided by the Department of Health. The Department of Health has the highest priority, but, within the Department of Health, these services will not be at the top of the hierarchy of demands. It is a problem not only for the Education side but for the Health side as well.

I will ask Keir to come in on this one, and then Marie, because that is how we have agreed to deal with this. Keir, would you like to start?

Dr Keir Bloomer (Independent Review of Education): Thank you very much. We regard investment in the early years as absolutely fundamental. You touched, Chair, on the matter of health visiting — we mentioned it at the previous meeting as well — which is extremely important. We would like to see it undertaken in a way that is coordinated by Education and Health so that it covers not only the physical development side but the intellectual development side, as, indeed, it is intended to do. We found that performance by the various health boards varies a lot and is, in one or two cases, unsatisfactory and that there is a tendency for the early visits to take place more frequently than the later ones. Of course, the later visits are more education-focused, and it is extremely important that that be remedied as quickly as possible.

I stress that early years learning is very important to all children. The point about health visiting is most important for those who have special educational needs, because that is the way those needs can be identified early, and, as we all know, if the needs are identified early and early intervention takes place, it is more likely to be effective and can be done at a lesser cost than trying to repair the damage at a later stage in education. The early years are important for those who have special educational needs.

It is also extremely important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds generally, and that includes those who have special needs and those who do not. It is fundamental that, in the very early years, all children should have a rich menu of experiences of the world. That is the way they begin their learning, and affluent families can provide that better than families in deprived circumstances. The most important way of combating educational disadvantage is to extend early years provision. It is important for all children, whether they are deprived or have special educational needs or not, because it is the period when concept formation takes place, and that is the basis of all thinking and learning. All young people, regardless of their circumstances, can benefit from quality preschool education and learning. We regard that area as of the highest importance.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Keir. Can you pick up — sorry, Marie, were you looking to come in?

Ms Marie Lindsay (Independent Review of Education): I want to expand on Dr Bloomer's points about the early years.

Your point is about the links between education and health. In early years we are talking about pre-birth, and health has priority in the early stages of pregnancy, but, as the child progresses after birth

and so on, the role of learning becomes more significant. There is a need for communication between the Departments, but we have suggested that an early intervention and early support agency be formed that will work collaboratively on the needs of all children, including those who are disadvantaged. The primary role is to support parents, as they are the first educators. Just as the health service has health visiting to support health, they could easily support the learning and development needs of the children. Supporting parents is key.

The other thing that is easy to fix is communication and data sharing. That does not readily happen at the minute, but it is probably quite an easy fix. It is worth emphasising, and so much could be said about the early years, but the current Sure Start model is workable and has six key priority areas. At the minute, there are 38 Sure Starts in designated areas, but it could be rolled out to all areas for a lesser cost than starting a new project. I do not think that we need to. The Sure Start is valued by all parents, including those who are disadvantaged. Often with initiatives to address disadvantage, people feel labelled and stigmatised, but we did not find that with Sure Start. Everyone loves it and wants to avail themselves of it. The Sure Start model has quite a bit to offer, and I can say more about that if needed, but it needs to be rolled out across all areas, and it needs to focus equally on the six priorities. Our review found that the emphasis was different in different areas. Being responsive to local needs is a strength, but the core elements need to be in all Sure Start programmes.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): To be clear, you advocate the universal roll-out of Sure Start.

Ms Lindsay: Yes.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes. The cost would be about £30 million more.

Mr Robin McLoughlin (Independent Review of Education): I will add to what Keir and Marie said. Not to lose sight of SEN, which we talked about at our previous session and in which early intervention is absolutely valid, as Keir said, early years intervention for all children, disadvantaged and SEN, is the best investment that we as a society can make. That is shown across the world, not just in this part of the world, and it is something that we really need to implement as soon as possible. There are recommendations on page 15 about such an early years service that would be across health and education. I will not read them out, but colleagues can look at them at paragraph 1.21. Ultimately, there is a time bomb, and COVID is a good example. During COVID, many families did not get the support that they needed. Those children are now progressing into school, and we need to ensure that we put in place the best measures that we can. This year, it is exactly the same. We need to ensure that we have the best measures we can as early as we can get them to help those families and children to have the skill sets necessary to move forward. You may have seen in the national news last week that there was a chat about 50% of children who were starting primary school not being toilet-trained. As a society, we have to help those children. We have to do the best that we can, and our recommendations outline that and what Marie said about Sure Start.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is really helpful, although it is a little dispiriting sometimes when you think that Sure Start was always meant to be universally rolled out. That was the policy intention when it was first launched in the Blair era, but we are slow learners sometimes.

I have a final point on the collaboration between Health and Education. We have had a lot of discussion at the Committee around the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. You have your recommendations around the early years partnership board. We have the Ray Jones review. Do you have a view on what the best mechanism is to make this collaboration happen, or is it simply that it needs to be done? Our frustration in the Committee is often that it feels that a lot of lip service is paid to it but that, when we drill down, it is hard to identify the areas where genuine collaboration is happening, where resources are being pooled and where it feels that there is genuine cross-cutting engagement between the relevant Departments. Does the panel have a view on the best mechanism to ensure that this happens and that there is some accountability, which is the key, that it is happening?

Sir Gerry Loughran: Keir, would you like to pick that up?

Dr Bloomer: Yes, certainly. Collaboration between Departments is not an area of strength of the public service anywhere in the UK. That is why we thought that a fully integrated service was probably the best approach, in which the elements that are to do with learning and the elements that are to do with health, in the sense of physical development but not the medical dimension of it, should be brought within a single service. We felt that, in the first instance, the thing to do was to have a board

that was chaired by both Ministers to encourage collaboration. All over the world, there is a great interest in expanding and improving early years services, and a lot of countries have been interested in trying to draw together the contributing Departments. Many jurisdictions have succeeded in bringing together the parts that are concerned with education and with social care, but none have yet succeeded in bringing health entirely into this collaboration, so there is an opportunity here to be world-leading.

Finally, the evidence from extensive research is that high-quality early years education makes a lasting difference to educational performance but that average provision does not, so quality of provision here is absolutely essential. To achieve that kind of high quality, bringing together the education and the health dimensions is of paramount importance.

Ms Isabel Nisbet (Independent Review of Education): I have worked in government in health for a long time, and the essential thing is that there must be collaboration at all levels. It is not sufficient to say that people at the working level will work together as individuals, because we met many people in our review who do that despite everything. The way that they are accountable, the way that they are managed and the way that their funds are allocated must represent the needs of all children brought together. It is not enough to rely on the working level; there has to be the collaboration at the government and ministerial levels.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thanks for that. That is the crucial point. We hear about lots of great projects where something good is delivered by two agencies working together, but that is not a systemic response to the issue, and that is something that we want to take forward. We hope to engage with the Health Committee after the summer recess to draw out some of those issues.

I do not want to take up any more time with my questions. I will bring in the Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks very much. You are all welcome, and thanks for your report, which contains a lot of good recommendations.

You have talked about early intervention — I will come back to that in a moment — vocational pathways, funding for 'A Fair Start', SEN transformation and the issue around transition years. You will get no argument from anyone on the Committee about the need for early intervention. From the evidence, we all know that the greater the investment in early years, the greater the impact that it will have. There is no argument here at all around that.

There are a couple of issues that I find slightly contentious where I feel that the panel dodged issues and, perhaps, took diplomatic or political decisions. One of those is the issue of academic selection and the connection that it has to underachievement. When you were here a couple of weeks ago, Keir, talking about the evidence around selection, you said:

"The consensus in it is probably that selection marginally improves performance at the top and marginally diminishes it at the bottom. The amounts are not big".

That flies in the face of all the evidence that I have seen. Do not get me wrong: I am not hung up on this. If there is no long tail of underachievement here, that is good. If academic selection is not impacting on educational outcomes, that is good too. If the evidence is there, I am happy to look at it. However, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report, for example, says:

"there are marked differences in the extent of early school leaving between the two jurisdictions"

with the North

"experiencing over twice the level of early school leaving"

as the South. The report said that it was likely that academic selection in the North was a strong contributory factor. It says:

"a dominant theme in policy discourse and research has centred on the impact of academic selection" —

there is probably no area of policy that has had more scrutiny than academic selection —

"policy discourse and research has centred on the impact of academic selection on student experiences and outcomes ... Test preparation often involves private tuition outside school, with take-up rates higher among higher income groups and such tuition conferring an advantage in grammar school access ... At the school level, the consequence of academic selection has been a longer tail of lower-achieving schools than is the case in England, Wales or Scotland."

That is from Gallagher and Smith in 2000. The report continues:

"Although both systems have a diversity of school types at secondary level, the main difference relates to the use of academic selection to determine school allocation"

in the North.

"Despite a large body of academic research indicating that academic selection only benefits a small minority and disadvantages the rest of the student body ... The Costello report (2004) found social disadvantage to be perpetuated through the academic selection system ... the OECD has also maintained that academic selection leads to 'clear structural challenges to equity' ... The differences in exam performance between secondary schools and grammar schools are well documented"

in the North

"and while there are very high results"

in the North

"it masks a very 'long tail of underachievement'".

With respect to the North:

"we conclude that the continuation of the transfer examination system, which segregates children into comprehensive and grammar schools at the age of 11, is likely to remain a significant contributory factor to the much higher levels of educational inequality observed there."

We follow the evidence on early intervention, and I have tried to follow the evidence on academic selection and underachievement. It is clear from the research that has been done that we lag well behind the South. It is clear that we also lag behind Scotland, but I do not want to compare the system here with three other poorly performing systems with poor outcomes. I want to know what we need to do to get to a level similar to the model in the Twenty-six Counties. Those are the challenges. As I say, I think that you dodged the issue of academic selection and its relationship to educational underachievement. I would like to hear your commentary on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We had a long intro there, and the Deputy Chair has not left a lot of time for the answer. We need to get a succinct answer really quickly on that one so that those issues can be drawn out. Over to you.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Pat, we did, of course, discuss the possibility that you would raise with us the long tail of underachievement, so —

Mr Sheehan: There is a surprise.

Sir Gerry Loughran: — we are quite prepared to take that up. I will ask Keir and Robin to respond.

One of the things I would say is that we carried out this work over the last two years, finishing in December last year. The evidence that we collected was contemporaneous evidence; it was from people who are currently operating the systems and providing information about why it is currently working. With respect, some of the references that you made are quite old.

Mr Sheehan: There is a thread.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I am sure that you could justify that, but I just make the point that we did not really look at material that was 24 years old, for example, because we did not regard that as being of great help to us in dealing with the system as it currently is. However, that is only a comment. I will ask Keir to come in and then Robin.

Dr Bloomer: Thank you. We discussed the question of a long tail of underachievement at the launch, Pat, and I was not entirely able to satisfy you then, so I hope that I can do a little better now. It is maybe worthwhile avoiding the phrase. Is there underachievement in Northern Ireland? Yes, there is — a lot of it. Should we do something about it? Most certainly, yes. That is probably common ground between us. We advocate significant change to the transfer process. I do not think that we have ducked the issue. We recommend removing the test as soon as possible and replacing it —.

Mr Sheehan: Sorry, Keir, can I interrupt for one second? With regard to your recommendation to phase out academic selection, if the impact of it is so marginal, why bother phasing it out?

Dr Bloomer: No, we did not recommend phasing out academic selection; we recommended phasing out the particular mechanism that is used for academic selection at present, which is the test sat in the final year of primary school, and its replacement with a process of continuous assessment over a period of time. That ties in with another view expressed in our report, namely that we know far too little about primary education at present and about its level of success. We think that there has to be standardised testing at intervals throughout primary school, and that will enable a better picture to be built up of the potential of the individual child than can be done by a single test conducted in the present circumstances. That is what I am saying there. That is a significant change.

You said that you thought that it was not helpful to compare the position in Northern Ireland with three poor jurisdictions and that you would like to see standards comparable to those being achieved in the Republic. I totally agree with you about the excellent quality of the standards being achieved in the Republic. Being at least as good as the Republic is a worthwhile aim. It is not correct to say that there are three underachieving jurisdictions. It pains me to say this, but England is doing rather well and improving fast — probably faster than the Republic of Ireland at present. It is doing particularly well, for example, on literacy, which, as you know, is fundamental to all educational progress.

One thing that is striking about the position in Northern Ireland is the significant group of schools that are performing well. I am talking about post-primary schools and their GCSE and A-Level performance. I went into that issue in some depth at the previous meeting, and I can refer you to particular pages. Those schools are serving deprived areas and are doing extremely well. It is important that we look at the experience of success where we have it and try to profit from it. It has not been done anything like as well as it might have been done in the past.

I will not labour the point, because your colleagues have heard it all before. My final point is that the contemporary evidence on academic selection is that its impact on the system as a whole is not particularly large, though its impact on individuals may vary. Overall, it is probably somewhat negative but not massively so. You may wish to draw from that different conclusions from those that we drew. We drew up a set of recommendations, the delivery of which, including their acceptability, we thought was practicable. As I said, you may end up with a different conclusion from us.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will have to draw a line there. I know that you were keen to come in, Robin, but we are well over time on that line of inquiry. I hope that the answer goes some way to addressing some of your concerns, Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: We could sit here for two hours and go back and forth, but I realise that there are time constraints.

Mr McLoughlin: I am happy to pick it up another time.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): No doubt it is an issue that will be picked up again. Apologies, but it is in the interests of other members who are looking to get in.

Mr Baker: Thank you, panel. I will follow on from what the Chair asked about early intervention. Recently, I had a meeting with the Education Authority (EA). It is putting together integrated teams for September 2024, but there is no input from the Department of Health. Keir said that we have the chance to be "world-leading": how does that lack of input fit with international practice and outcomes?

Sir Gerry Loughran: I would like to have added to the earlier exchange that we had the opportunity to talk to officials from the Department of Education and the Department of Health who deal with early years. We were impressed by the extent to which they already collaborate and have a continuing dialogue of considerable significance. The big problem is resources. That impacts, as I said, as much on the Health side as it does on Education. At a previous meeting, we talked about the shortage of health visitors and, therefore, of health visiting.

A big takeaway, which is something for the Committee, is that collaboration is really important but money is even more important. With the best will in the world, you can collaborate well, but, if you do not have the resources, will you be able to deliver? One recommendation that we made is that there should be ring-fenced resources for early years. That is the only way to protect those resources, because, when the cuts come, ring-fenced money is reasonably secure. It is really worth thinking about that. Sorry, Robin, do you want to pick up on that?

Mr McLoughlin: I will just pick up on two observations. One is what Gerry said: money is very tight in the Executive Budget. I am not convinced that there is a full understanding of how quickly we will run out of money in Education. As we sit here, the education system, in my view, will be bankrupt very soon. I appreciate that the Executive have difficult decisions to make regarding other Departments, understandably with Health and the acute nature of it.

If we sit at school level, at this moment, most schools are predicting, on the basis of their initial opening budget, which will change when the June monitoring money comes — it will need to come — roughly a 10% deficit at the end of this year, a 20% deficit at the end of the following one and a 30% deficit at the end of the third year. That is completely unrecoverable.

In schooling and the education of our country, unless there is a change in the quantum of moneys — it is detailed in here, but then you must add the pay award for teaching and non-teaching staff and the increase in superannuation employer costs — we cannot balance our books. There needs to be an understanding that that quantum of money will have to be put into the Education budget, and it needs to come urgently. We are heading towards a precipice.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Marie is chair of a primary school board of governors. She might like to comment on the same point.

Ms Lindsay: All three of us are members of boards of governors in our various schools and we have all had to do the three-year financial plans. All schools — those that were in a healthy position prior to this and those that were not — face astronomical deficits over their three-year plan. That is a crisis, and it needs to be addressed. While there are pressing issues — we are talking about the EA, the integrated teams and the fact that there is no input from Health, absolutely — but we have to deal with the pressing priority of investment in education in order to get to the more bread-and-butter issues, like getting Health and Education working together on the integrated teams. I sit as a member of the EA: I recently joined.

Robin's point is well made. We see this across all schools. I see others who are familiar with the financial plans that are coming in from our schools. We are in crisis, the system is in crisis, and we need investment quickly.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Just to complete the negative tone of what we are saying, in my school I have never had a deficit, but, this year coming, starting in September, our prediction is of a massive deficit.

Mr Baker: I have one more wee question. The Department of Education would say that it has a policy of inclusion: do you agree with that?

Ms Lindsay: I will start. "Inclusion" means many different things to different people. We look at this in great detail, particularly in relation to special educational needs, because, sometimes, when we talk about "inclusion", people talk about different things. However, in our report, we talk about it as "all learners learning together". That is a big area, and it will bring about big change. There is the Human Rights Act 1998, parents' right to choose, disability entitlement and so on. There is a lot of legislation to which, maybe, Education needs to respond better.

There needs to be an agreed definition of what we mean by "inclusion", as a starting or base point. Then we need to look at the good examples of education systems that are becoming very inclusive

worldwide; some locally, some further afield. We looked at those as part of our report. Rather than suggesting that we go with this, that or the other one — our remit did not allow us to go into the depths of that, but we spent time on this — we said, "Get your definition of what you mean by 'inclusion' and look at best practice where you can find it — we can point in the direction of some of the best practice that we have been looking at — and then decide what is the best model for here". Transplanting something from elsewhere will not necessarily work.

There is a lot of work to be done on inclusion. It will become an increasingly big issue. The special educational needs debate is now focused on places, which does not really address what those young people need. It does not address the strategic direction of travel for educating all our children. The whole inclusion agenda is, therefore, in its infancy. There are green shoots but a lot of work to be done, and our report only really points in that direction.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will bring Isabel in quickly, as we are short on time for this query.

Ms Nisbet: I will respond quickly on inclusion. There are two kinds of inclusion. One is intentional and about what people want to do. We saw a huge amount of commitment among the people we met to trying to achieve inclusion at all levels. The other one is in the descriptive sense of what is actually happening. In practice, that is not working out so much, and a lot of the recommendations that we made are intended to try to bring the actual situation closer to the intentions.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is probably worth commenting on Robin's contribution in relation to that dire warning about budget. Is the panel's view on that as simple as, "We need to get more money into school budgets"? Is it as simple as that, or is investment needed in other areas? When you talk about investment in education, what are we looking at?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes, it is 100% about investment across the education piece. We talked about investment in an early years service to ensure that the most disadvantaged in our society and those with SEN are identified earlier and there can be help and assistance. That includes training ed psychs and health visitors. There is a huge cost involved in training and in ensuring that that service is there. You go through the whole educational journey from pre-birth to your last day on this land, and we need to ensure that, throughout that journey, we have investment that meets the needs of our communities and societies.

Going back to Isabel's point, inclusion is about allowing people to develop the life that they have an opportunity to lead and ensuring that we have an inclusive and prosperous society. Going back to our opening comments, if we do not invest in education, we will not have that society. This is a challenge to the entire machinery of government, including the Executive: education needs funded, and it is education — not just schools, although schools are in a dire position — that needs to be funded properly. We make many recommendations in our report. We highlight the recommendations that are cost-neutral, and we highlight where there are potential savings or additional costs. If we do not invest in education, however, the precipice is before us, and we need to be conscious of that.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I will go back to a point that Pat was making about the South of Ireland. The biggest difference between here and the South of Ireland is that it has really invested in education.

Ms Lindsay: Can I just add a footnote to that? It will only take —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Very briefly.

Ms Lindsay: One of the most startling figures — I think that it shocked all of us when we were writing our report — was that failing to intervene at an early stage has cost the public purse £536 million per annum. The cost per annum for those who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) was £134 million. How can we afford that? We need to think about investment. That was just a footnote to what Robin has been saying.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): There is a lot to take away from that question, Danny. Cathy is next.

Mrs Mason: It is good to see you again. In the report, on childcare and early years, you say:

"There should be ... expansion of early years education."

Specifically, it recommends 20 hours of early years education a week for two-year-olds and 22.5 hours for three-year-olds but with priority being given to two-year-olds. Last week, we heard from the Department about the £25 million allocation for childcare. The Minister is starting with transitioning preschool education, which includes three-to-four-year-olds, to 22.5 hours. Given the tight budgets that we are talking about, is that the right allocation of money? Does that put that tight budget into the right area?

Ms Lindsay: It is not for me to comment on the decisions that the Minister makes. In our report, we say that there should be a phased increase in provision. We start with phase 1, which is about focusing on disadvantage. We talk about having 12.5 hours for two-year-olds and 22.5 hours for three-year-olds. We then talk about enhancing that so that all two-year-olds and three-year-olds get 22 hours provision. Finally, phase 3 is full provision, where all two-year-olds would have 20 hours, and all three-year-olds would have 22.5 hours. Clearly, we cost that as well.

Where do you start? Who is to say whether the three-year-olds or the two-year-olds need it more? We have provision for three-year-olds. There is statutory and non-statutory provision. There is limited provision at the minute for two-year-olds. With regard to early intervention, you would feel that the two-year-olds need it more. Are we set up and do we have the infrastructure for those two-year-olds? Maybe not, because of the statutory provision. Do I have the answer for you about what is most feasible? I am probably not in a position to come down on a decision on that, but we recommend that it should be expanded. It should be increased for three-year-olds and it should be increased for two-year-olds.

I am sorry that I cannot give you a definitive answer because I would not have the data to distil the implications of starting with two-year-olds rather than the three-year-olds. However, we suggest a phase, and we suggest prioritising disadvantaged children where it supports the parents to get employment.

Mrs Mason: Do you see Sure Start as a pathway for that disadvantaged group?

Ms Lindsay: Absolutely, yes. Of course it is.

Mrs Mason: Should there be a more geographic spread of Sure Start?

Mr McLoughlin: Absolutely. Sure Start is a crucial element of the solution and widespread. To expand on something that Marie said, due to the wide-ranging nature of our report, we could say only what the evidence was that was leading us to the recommendations. The implementation of the recommendations is another layer of work that is required.

Mrs Mason: Yesterday was United Nations International Day of Play. Play is referenced a couple of times in the review but more in terms of upskilling the workforce to include play and increase support of Play Matters. How important is play in early education?

Mr McLoughlin: I think that Keir is looking to come in on that point.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Certainly, Keir.

Dr Bloomer: I will intervene on another point, but I will deal with the one that has just been raised as well.

In assessing the importance of making provision for two-year-olds, we have to take account of how the brain develops. From the period before birth through to around the age of two, the brain is remarkably plastic. It is open to external influence; in other words, it is perfectly possible to improve the capacity of the individual to learn during that period. From the age of around two and a half, three, three and a half, that plasticity markedly declines. Therefore, if we are going to tackle disadvantage, doing it at age two is extremely important. Doing it even earlier than that would be highly desirable, but we did not have as much knowledge as we would have liked about the provision that can be made for children at the age of one and so forth. Therefore, the extension of provision to two-year-olds, whether immediately or in the comparatively near future, is a matter of great significance indeed.

Perhaps the member could remind me about the point that she just made, and I will respond to it.

Mrs Mason: It was around play and the importance of play in a child's early years in their development, emotionally, intellectually and physically.

Dr Bloomer: Play is extremely important, but it has to be structured play. It has to be play from which learning can, in fact, take place. I will remind you of a point that I made earlier: good early years education has a lasting beneficial effect but average and poor do not. Therefore, the skill of the practitioner is extremely important, and the management of structured play is not straightforward.

I agree entirely with you about the importance of it, but we have to make sure that it is well done. Over time, we will probably have to learn from experience so that it can be done better and the training of the individuals involved will be more effective.

Mrs Mason: Thank you.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you so much. It is so good to see you again. I am grateful for all the work that you have done. The report is so wide-ranging: it covers so much, and you have recommended so much. I love the fact that early years features so heavily in it, but, Robin, what you have said has completely derailed everything that I wanted to ask specifically on early years. Given everything that you have done as a panel and the level to which you have looked into the education system, if you were Education Minister, what would you prioritise right now? The reality is that we have really tight budgets. We need to push for investment — I understand that — but there is only so much money that we will have or can push for. If you were in the position of having to make decisions, what would you, personally, feel was the thing to focus on?

Mr McLoughlin: I will reframe your question in a slightly different way, because I am not going to be Education Minister, and it will not be my decision or the decision of anyone on the panel. Ultimately, we have to look at the positives as well. That is what I highlighted the last time we were at the Committee. All the political parties are interested in education. That is great; you do not find that in all parts of the world. We have an excellent education workforce — our lecturers, teachers and various professionals in the workforce. You do not find that in all jurisdictions in the world. We are starting from a good place. We are fortunate, but there are costs, and the costs have ratcheted up. We know that the cost of living and the cost of pay awards — the costs of anything — have ratcheted, and we need to ensure that we fund appropriately.

Pat, I will go back to your question. Absolutely: the South has made many strategic and good decisions on the curriculum, on vocational and technical education and on ensuring that there is provision for all young people to lead them into different pathways. We need to look at our system and ensure that, in 20 years' time, we can be proud of the education system — not just schooling but all aspects that are included in the report — and that we have done the best we can. Unfortunately, at the moment, Northern Ireland is the poorest funded. We have evidenced that in our report. Irrespective of the current pressures — we estimate the shortfall to be roughly £300 million — we need to understand that that means the political leadership of Northern Ireland being brave. Going back to where we started, investment in education is the best investment that any society across the world can make.

Ms Nicholl: I completely agree. I saw numbers this week showing that spending on under-fives' education in Scotland is £2,586 per person and in Northern Ireland it is £318 per person. It is shocking. Where do we start? We need to invest in education, but what part of it would you prioritise?

Mr McLoughlin: We outlined our priorities in our report. We also outlined things that we can do quickly that have zero cost, things that will cost a small amount, things that will cost a substantial amount of money and things that will require legislative change. When we put our report together, we put the recommendations in each section in blue, as you know. They are clear and well defined.

Ultimately, decisions will have to be made by the Executive and the political leadership of Northern Ireland. In a sense, there is an element of my asking you the same question. We are sitting here and saying that we need to invest in early years; we need a curriculum that is fit for purpose; we need investment to allow us to do that; and we need to upskill our teaching and lecturing staff and our further education professionals. Many of those things are changes that need to take place with no cost. For other things, there are substantial costs. You have to prioritise the order in which you do them.

That is a political decision, because it will be made around an Executive table and, ultimately, in each Department. We have mentioned health today, for example, multiple times. Health visitation is an example. I understand that it is not a statutory requirement; when budget pressures come, therefore, it can, unfortunately, be done not to the extent that is required by families that have particular challenges.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Isabel is looking to come in to respond, and so is Keir. I will let you decide among yourselves who wants to come in first.

Ms Nisbet: My point is brief. It is just to keep a couple of things in mind. One is to be clear about what Robin has been saying: there is a financial logjam that needs to be addressed so that the investment plan can begin. Also, what, we think, can start now is the early work that is required on the longer-term substantive developments that we talk about, particularly in matters such as the curriculum, which, everybody has said to us, is at the heart of what we need to look at. It takes time to do that, and it needs to get started. That is not a matter of just spending money; it is a question of getting the right people in to start the thinking.

Dr Bloomer: I would wish to spend my time as Education Minister convincing people of the importance of investing in education. That is a priority task for any Minister of Education.

On what the priorities for action on the report ought to be, I congratulate the Minister on taking steps on early years, given the fact that resources are extremely constrained and how pivotal early years is in our report. I would then suggest that action is taken on three areas of the report. Action in each of those areas would be of fairly low cost or, indeed, might make savings.

The first is curriculum reform based on a clear understanding of how people learn, and that is outlined in our report. Secondly, I would encourage collaboration through, at a local level, the area learning groups and through reform of the entitlement framework to overcome the present difficulty of the strong financial disincentive to collaboration between the colleges and schools. Finally, I would make a start on our proposals to reconfigure the school estate. I know you will deal with that next week rather than this week. That has the potential to achieve savings but also to make considerable improvements in the education system in Northern Ireland, both for children learning together and to ensure that all schools are educationally viable and can support a rich and varied curriculum.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is as direct an answer as you are likely to get, Kate.

Ms Nicholl: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have our three priorities. Thank you. That is really helpful.

Mr Brooks: The last time you were here, we discussed creating vocational routes and so on for those whose gifts are not academic. We will talk about that in future weeks, but it is relevant here. On assessment, qualifications and how we use GCSEs, you talked about the need for a limitation on how those are used as barriers to progress in people's educational journeys. How much is disadvantage aggravated by a system that focuses on a limited number of a pupil's skills and gifts? What more could be done? How should we look at our qualifications to change that?

Mr McLoughlin: Significant change is needed, and our recommendations indicate that. We have a crude system of five A* to C including English and mathematics, seven A* to C including English and mathematics, and three A* to C at A level. We need significant change. There must be a broader range of measurements. One of our recommendations, which Marie touched on, is the ability for data to be shared across institutions, with the child and with the parent to help understanding, to help the child's skills development and allow them to progress and to celebrate their progression. The current crude measurement is not particularly helpful, because it constrains the opportunity to recognise true success across a wide range of skills.

On barriers, the notion that we insist, as we do at the moment, on passes in GCSE English and maths — whereby you must keep resitting and resitting it until you pass, which some children, unfortunately, are not able to — is not fair and is completely the wrong approach. We need a different set of qualifications in literacy, numeracy and IT. We recommend that, into adult years, those qualifications should be freely accessible to anyone who did not pass GCSE English or maths. There should not be

this barrier of, "Well, you didn't get those qualifications, so you can't apply for all these jobs for the rest of your life". That is what happens. We set people up to fail for the rest of their lives because we have those barriers. That is one of a number of examples that I could give.

We need a broader measurement. The qualifications system is complex, not well understood and difficult for children and parents to navigate. We need a much simpler qualifications system. I know that Isabel is looking to come in, but I will make one final point. There will most likely be reform of qualifications post the general election. We need to feed into that debate. It goes back to Pat's question. There has been massive reform, in a good way, of qualifications in the South. We need to look at other parts of the world where the curriculum has led to children being allowed to continually progress and to adults being able to return to education and continually upskill to meet the needs of the jobs that are in the economy and to fulfil their lives.

Ms Nisbet: We say in the report what the purpose of qualifications should be: to certify learning, to support development and to feed into the education of those who take them. We found aspects of qualifications that do not serve that purpose. People are required to flog away at GCSE maths with decreasing success. Another example is some schools using requirements for particular levels at GCSE or AS level to exclude pupils, requiring them to leave and go elsewhere. In our view, a school that takes on a pupil should retain responsibility for that pupil as part of the education system of Northern Ireland. It should not dump people because of qualification outcomes; that is a wrong use of qualifications.

We felt that too much detailed content is crammed in at the age of 16 through the GCSE system, which takes over the curriculum and leads to a kind of flogging away at a demanding, content-heavy schedule. As in other countries in the UK, an attempt has to be made to draw together the needs at that level in a way that is less content-heavy and is more about preparing people to enter the workforce of the 21st century.

Finally, as someone who has worked in qualifications in England and Wales as well as Northern Ireland, I think that it is essential that the Northern Ireland qualifications leaders have a strong place at the table when UK-wide reform and change are being considered. There have been examples — I mention the development of T levels in England — of Northern Ireland being more or less ignored until the last minute, which was, of course, to nobody's advantage. It is important that they be supported to be in a strong position to be involved in the discussions from the beginning.

Mr McLoughlin: I will add one point. It is not helpful that assessment and curriculum are sometimes conflated with qualifications, although, obviously, they are intrinsically linked. Qualifications are content-heavy, with a huge workload for young people and a huge workload for our teaching staff. That is not helpful. We need to look at reducing the content in order to allow knowledge to be built. We need knowledge — that is in our report, and Keir has talked today about the brain and development — but the application of knowledge is equally important. Our qualifications system is too crammed and too busy and does not allow a love of learning to be created. We need to create space and capacity. If we could do one thing for young people and teachers' workloads, it would be to change that approach.

Ms Lindsay: Since we have young people in the room listening to this, it is important that we reflect the views of young people, which we engaged with extensively throughout our report. They said exactly what you have heard from Isabel and Robin. They want the curriculum to include skills for life, and they want them to be valued. They want to learn how to be resilient. The world that they are growing up in has created so much pressure for them, and we know about the influence on mental health. It is important that, whatever the pathway, the curriculum that they experience gives them the skills that they need to cope with the world that they are living in and emerging into. That really was universal from our young people when we engaged with them.

Mr Brooks: Thank you very much. Thinking back to my experience of GCSEs, the content-heavy nature of them lent itself more to cramming — the word you used — for a test rather than retaining anything thereafter. It was less about proof of your knowledge and more to do with how much you could remember for one test. It is so important that, throughout young people's educational journey — I am glad that you addressed it — we give them confidence, so that they remain engaged in education. If we tell them throughout it that they are a failure, they will disengage and not re-engage, even if there is free access in later life.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We will have the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) here for a session before we break up for the summer recess. There has been a

lot of discussion about GCSEs, including whether they are fit for purpose and the idea that they are qualifications that close doors. Robin, you referenced students repeatedly resitting GCSE maths just to get a grade C so that they can move on. It does not feel like that is a helpful system for our young people. If we were to move away from the requirement of GCSEs being the gateway to everything, how would we address the fact that most jobs in the employment market have the arbitrary threshold of five GCSEs, including Cs at English and maths? The Education Department has no control over the labour market. Does the panel have a view on how we could still facilitate young people to move into employment? There seems to be a bigger consideration there beyond that.

Mr Brooks: It is the case even for Civil Service and government jobs.

Mr McLoughlin: Absolutely.

Ms Nisbet: We discussed at some length whether there was any place for GCSEs nowadays, when we recommend that education in some form should continue for everybody up to 18. There is good literature in cases for and against the importance of assessment at about the age of 16. Broadly, we took a balanced view that there is value — I think that this is the prevailing view — in taking stock in some way but not in such a content-heavy and demand-flogging way that it takes over the curriculum in the way in which Robin described.

The second question is whether the barrier of five GCSEs or particular levels in particular subjects should be used as a hurdle that will hold people back: no, it should not. Those values are used to evaluate institutions and schools in particular. In our report, we recommend that a wider dashboard be used to hold schools to account, rather than a rather clumsy stocktake of GCSE attainment. There are attempts in quite a few countries to make more general the kind of stocktake that is done at the age of 16. Some teachers do not like that because they want more detail in their subject. However, we think that we need to bite the bullet, because there is too much content, as Robin said. For the sake of the future and the learners, we need to have a more sensible and proportionate stocktake at the age of 16.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Isabel. That is helpful.

Mr Brooks: It is something to follow up with the Economy Department in a future meeting. It is important that jobs and so on ask for qualifications that are specifically relevant to the tasks that the person is being asked to undertake. We have aptitude tests —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is about skills as well as qualifications.

Mr Brooks: — that are there just to wipe people out of the application process, rather than to —

Mr McLoughlin: Qualifications will always be required, for the reasons that Isabel articulated. We need qualifications, but it is about the way in which qualifications are set up. We also need the skills or — to use Dr Bloomer's language, which I agree with — the application of knowledge. That is what we all do in our adult jobs: we apply knowledge. We look it up, and we then apply that knowledge to whatever the situation is. We need that balance to be struck better at GCSE and post-16 level. There is a need to have qualifications that are fit for purpose and allow everyone to progress into the world of work. That is about the 14-19 strategy, which goes back to your point, David: that is the Department of Education working with the Department for the Economy and our colleges, although I know that we recommend that they come together into one Department. We need to do a lot of work on our curriculum, our assessment and our qualifications, which goes back to the priorities that were articulated earlier.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you so much for everything that you have detailed so far. I will touch on standardisation and preschool. I am contacted regularly by preschool nursery providers that have their allocated places changed every year. It is reflected in the report at 1.13 and 1.14 that there is a flexibility in the system, which is obviously a positive depending on children coming through. However, the problem with that is that there is no consistency for those providers. In one year, they could have eight funded places, but, the next year, it could be 20, and the next year, it could be eight again. Did you look further into how that could affect the workforce, struggles with fundraising or demand?

Ms Lindsay: Clearly, we could not go into that level of detail on the outworkings of all of what we recommended, but we recommended that preschool provision is standardised. We have statutory and

non-statutory provision. There are funding issues, ratio issues and a host of things that there are discrepancies in. The other thing that is difficult for them and for a lot of the education sector is the year-to-year funding. That means that those providers, when it comes to the end of the financial year, do not know if they are able to pay their workers to the end of June and so on. It is so precarious. We recommend three-year financial planning in general for the whole education sector, but we also recommend a standardised approach to the early years service. We list some of the areas where we see discrepancies and where there should be standardised provision. As I said, we could not go into that specific detail, but we see the discrepancies and the challenges. As we recommend this as an area for investment and growth, we want standardised provision across it, including in workforce development, because the level of qualifications across the sector is varied. There are a lot of discrepancies across the system.

I hope that that answers the question. Does anybody want to refresh my memory on anything that I may have forgotten?

Mr McLoughlin: I have one small point. We need to support the sector to develop a professional support network that can upskill and lead to qualifications of value that ensure that those key members of our education system are supported to develop the skills necessary to support our young people. There are brilliant people working across many of these provisions, and ensuring a standardisation of approach will help support them even further.

Ms Brownlee: That is key, because I am seeing that the likes of that workforce feels undervalued. One year, those providers are secure and happy and have got all their places, but, the next year, they get a letter to say that it is being cut. They do not know where they will get funding from. They are writing to the Education Authority, the Department and others to try to get that support, and that then has an impact on the surrounding families who are placing them 1, 2 or 3. I agree that standardisation is a huge issue.

Ms Lindsay: It is even more acute than that because, with non-statutory provision, the way that it is funded is less than in the statutory provision. We explored all that, and, as I say, we are recommending that it is standardised and that the funding is on a three-year basis.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I will go back to the point about ring-fencing early years funding. If you do not do that, you will get that sort of outcome.

Ms Brownlee: Yes. Early years is an absolute priority.

Something else that has been raised with me frequently recently is exceptional circumstances. I know that, in the context of SEN, we have looked at exceptional circumstances. However, in the broader scheme of things, did you look at the Department and the Education Authority's process to plan for exceptional circumstances, the way this process is run and communication with it?

Sir Gerry Loughran: Are you referring to school admissions?

Ms Brownlee: Yes, sorry.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes, we have looked at that. As everybody involved in schools knows, school admissions is a tricky area. Exceptional circumstances are usually judged on an absolutely individual basis. My impression is that the system as a whole tends to be sympathetic to the applicant and that, therefore, outcomes are often very positive for people who apply. One of the concerns might be that the way that that whole system works is not as professional as it could be. That is not a criticism, because the people who volunteer to do it do a great job, giving up their time and so on. I think that your concern is about consistency, and that might be achievable if there were greater professionalisation and standardisation in the approach that is taken.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

Ms Hunter: Further to what Cheryl said, I am working on a case for a talented young pupil who is in P7 and will be transitioning into first year. She did not get her first choice of school due to being one point off what she needed to get. Her mental health was not taken into account. I agree that there is a need for more clarity for parents so they know what the system looks like, how to go about things in challenging circumstances and what bodies they should speak with.

My questions will take us back to the conversation about early years. Last year, we saw discussion about the potential removal of the pathway fund. I had the chance to meet different providers in my constituency, such as Harpur's Hill Primary School in Coleraine and the Coleraine Sure Start Partnership, to talk about early years and early development. They talked about the lack of ongoing investment in the sector. People have spent years working there and accumulating so much knowledge. They are so talented. They show a lot of care for the young people with whom they work. They said that the lack of job security essentially means that, year-on-year, we see talent leaving the sector. Will you share your thoughts on that?

Secondly, will you touch on some examples of approaches to early years that you have looked at from an international perspective? Are other countries doing things that we should be looking at or could replicate here?

Ms Lindsay: I am sure that others will want to come in on that question, but I will lead on it. We are acutely aware of the recruitment and retention crisis in early years. You are right: people are leaving for less pressurised work in better-paid jobs. We met professionals and paraprofessionals who are amazing. Their commitment, skills and expertise and the child-centred approach that they use are superb. Losing them from the system is probably a form of madness.

We have a lot to say about workforce development in early years and special educational needs. In everything that we recommend, we come back to workforce development needs. For early years, we talk about the difference in leadership between the statutory and non-statutory sectors. In the statutory sector, it is usually teacher-led, and, in the non-statutory sector — I will need to check — it may be staff who are level 3. We recommend that all early years staff are at least level 3. We talk about a proper programme of in-service training that should be provided for those professionals. There should be career progression and training, so they can see themselves grow and develop in their career. The needs and diagnoses of the children are changing. One of the things that stood out to us was not just the increasing numbers of children with complex needs but the increasing complexity of those needs. There is a huge need for a workforce development programme for early years workers. There is a need for recognition and reward. We need to tell those people how good they are. We all know living examples of children whose lives have been transformed by the work those people do. They should not be leaving to work in —

Ms Hunter: Aldi or Lidl or somewhere.

Ms Lindsay: Exactly. I did not know whether I should name anywhere.

Mr McLoughlin: They would earn more money there.

Ms Lindsay: Given the contribution that they make, something has to be done to help to retain them, professionalise them, give them the workforce development and training opportunities that they need and tell them how good they are. That is one thing that I hope our report did. The people we met who are engaged in educating our young people and the teams behind them that enable that are very aware of their commitment and the opportunity that they have to change young people's lives. We should embrace them, celebrate them and reward them accordingly. We say quite a bit about that.

Mr McLoughlin: It is about valuing the workforce.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Keir was looking to come in there.

Ms Lindsay: I imagine that Keir will want to come in.

Dr Bloomer: I am delighted at the interest that members have shown in the early years part of the report, because it is, in my view, fundamental. It is the single most important thing that can be done to improve the quality of education in Northern Ireland and, in particular, to assist in tackling disadvantage. I am delighted that you are as interested in it as you are.

Specifically, I will make two points on the questions that have just been put. The first is that the answer, in many ways, is money. If you want stability in the financing of nurseries and other centres for under-fives, and if you want to ensure that valued workers are able to be hired on permanent and full-time contracts, rather than in some more risky manner, resources have to be there in order to do it.

We have returned to this time and time again in the course of this afternoon, and in the afternoon of our previous session, but, really, it is fundamental to emphasise to politicians of all parties the importance of seeing education as an investment and understanding that that means that the resource has to be significantly greater than it is at present and has to be provided on a stable basis.

I will make the second point briefly. You asked about other kinds of work. We had a brief look at other systems, but time did not allow us to go into them in great detail. There are things that Northern Ireland could look at as it begins to develop its early years provision. I will just mention a couple of things. I do that in a personal capacity. As a group, we have not said that we endorse these things: all that I am saying is that they are worth looking at. The Scandinavian countries, all of which have excellent early years services, employ people who are known as "pedagogues". They have a teaching role, but they also have a kind of personal development role for young people in a sense that is not generally understood in UK practice. It would be worth, at least, having a look at that. Another example is the comuni of Reggio Emilia in Italy. One thing that they seek to do there, particularly in areas that cater for the early learning of disadvantaged children, is use the parents as assistants for, at least, a day a week in nurseries, with the intention of improving the parenting skills of the parents as much as of their making a contribution to the running of the nursery. There are many other things that can be learned from other jurisdictions, but those are two that, I think, are worth a look.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is us out of time on that query, but that was a really thorough answer.

Ms Hunter: I have just one final comment. I found it really fascinating. Post COVID, we have seen the challenges, particularly with speech and language and young people's development. When I saw the potential removal of the pathways funding, I thought that it was crazy. There needs to be that emphasis on early years. Those were really helpful responses. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It has all been really helpful.

Mr Butler: Thank you, guys. I have two questions. The second one is for anyone. Sir Gerry, if you do not mind, I will direct the first one to you. You guys were last here on 29 May. You gave an answer that caused a bit of concern with some constituents who contacted a number of us. It was about the role of classroom assistants and specialised teachers to deal with children with SEN. Some of your comments made me blink a little, but I think that what you said may have been misinterpreted, rather than what you actually believe. Can you remember what that was about? It sounded very much like you were saying that we need more teachers with that specialism. People felt that the comments undervalued what classroom assistants do in those settings.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Is one of your constituents a gentleman called Campbell, by any chance?

Mr Butler: No. Two ladies contacted me.

Sir Gerry Loughran: It is just that I got a letter from somebody called Campbell who picked up on that. I actually —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will just interrupt. We generally do not disclose the identity of anybody who has sent correspondence.

Sir Gerry Loughran: OK. Right. I beg your pardon. Anyway, this gentleman, who is nameless, Chair —

Mr Sheehan: That does not unsay it, Gerry. *[Laughter.]*

Sir Gerry Loughran: — completely misunderstood what I had said. He interpreted it as me talking about the role of classroom assistants in special schools: I was not. I was talking about the role of classroom assistants in mainstream schools. However, because he is a classroom assistant in a special school, he thought that I was undervaluing his role. I was not, in fact, addressing classroom assistants in special schools at all. At no stage did I talk about special schools at that last meeting. However, yes, I talked about the role of classroom assistants in mainstream schools, and I referred the Committee as a whole to our recommendations, which are in chapter 3 of both volume 1 and volume 2. We have recommended significant reform of how we deal with special educational needs in the

mainstream school system. I did not cover classroom assistants in special schools at all, Robbie. That is a fact.

Mr Butler: On the interpretation, mine was not specifically from a special school. I will leave it there, if that is OK, and I will look at the recommendations. I think that you have done a phenomenal job. Review is under way, and we should always strive to improve on things.

I have one question. Obviously, our schools, whether early years, primary or post-primary, are incredibly important. However, the other really important factor here is parents and carers. That is something that we have not teased out at any stage. The relationship of parents and carers with teachers and principals is not, perhaps, what it once was. It is difficult. Is there anything that the report has picked out in regard to that relationship? Children spend probably around 60% to 70% of their time at home and 20% to 30% in school over their school life. That plays a significant part too. How do we engage parents and carers much more in the value of education?

Mr McLoughlin: I will start. I would say, Robbie, that it is infused throughout the entire report. I will paraphrase slightly, because I cannot remember the exact quote: the primary educator is home, and it always will be. You know the phrase that it takes a village to raise a child. It is not just the parent or carer; it is the older brother or sister, the uncle, the auntie and the granny. We talked about that previously with respect to careers education as well. Of course, we need to have home as part of that partnership. In my school, I talk about that regularly: it is school, home and all the external agencies. We are all part of those external agencies, and all of this report is about those external agencies. If we do not have that effective partnership triangle working and an alert pupil in the middle of it, we will fail the child. Therefore, of course, the parent and home needs to be part of that. That comes back to the information flow, the statutory assessment, ease of access, understanding qualifications, a curriculum that is fit for purpose, careers advice that is suitable and Sure Start. Almost every recommendation that we make here involves home being part of that child's journey to ensure that they can fulfil their potential.

Let us be honest: when things go wrong, they should know how to access help and information and how to help and support their child. A big part of the curriculum and qualifications being simplified — you hear it regularly — is, "I cannot help my child any more because they are studying X subject now". However, it is about the support that they give to the child, not necessarily helping them with that bespoke individual subject. It is the support, and it is that journey again. If we have parent and school working alongside the child, with all the external agencies, generally speaking, things will go well, long term. I am not saying that there will not be bumps on the road. However, if we have a breakdown in one part of that triangle, things do not tend to go well. Therefore, it is absolutely central to the entire report. It is not in specific recommendations: it is throughout every recommendation.

Ms Lindsay: If there is one thing that came out of COVID, it is possibly the rebuilding of the relationship between home and school. Many of us sitting here can see how that worked in favour of building a strong relationship.

Where you see the rubber hitting the road is with vulnerable learners and what does not work for them. Often it is harder to build that relationship when English is not the first language or there are other barriers. We talked about the Travelling community — Roma and so on — the last time. People who have landed here may be culturally different. Building those relationships is more difficult, as is also the case with hard-to-reach parents. To answer your question about the importance of the relationship with the parent or carer: when it works well, it works well; but there are many instances when, for whatever reason, parents and carers are harder to reach. It makes a great difference when you do reach them and can engage them.

For many of them, English is not their first language. If I were to go into a school in Germany or Russia, how would I feel well able to represent young people? I would not, so it is about understanding that school can be an intimidating place and finding ways. June is the time of year when we are good at bringing them in for celebratory and fun events such as sports day. It is about engaging with them in a non-threatening way and making them see the school as a friendly, welcoming place where their child is celebrated for who they are rather than them always just having a phone call when something goes wrong. COVID has brought back some links for us that we can build on in a general way, but, if we think about vulnerable learners and how critical the home-school link is in promoting their educational journey and so on, we can understand how we can better develop those links. We recommend in the report building informal relationships with parents in whatever their circumstances and meeting them where they are at. That often means home visits. By doing that, you will understand a lot more about the child and give a much better service for them.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Pat, this will bring us to the end of our time. Very quickly, please, and then we will be at the end of the session.

Mr Sheehan: Did you look at the provision in delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) schools in the South, where they have a link person who liaises with the families?

Ms Lindsay: Yes. Pat, I am old enough to have been a home school visiting teacher who spent many years going out into homes in the Bogside and so on. It was invaluable, and the parents welcomed it. Again, we are back to investment and funding. If you take every teacher in the school going out and doing a home visit once a week — I had 34 in my form class — you can imagine that home visits took up a teaching timetable so were costing the school a teacher. For health and safety, you needed an accompaniment. You needed somebody with you to go out to the homes and so on. Home visits are still done in many of our schools. Many of our teachers are out daily, meeting our young people and coaxing them into school and so on. It has not stopped, but, because of the resourcing and because of the need for teachers to be in the classroom, there is less of it. I am well aware of the DEIS schools. I know quite a bit about them, how they have worked and how they have transformed. The link person is key. In my school, we had a community worker —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I have to draw the line at this stage, Marie.

Ms Lindsay: — who was very effective in working with families in the community.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. There is so much more that we would all like to explore, but we are absolutely out of time. We will have you again for another session, so we look forward to that. Thank you for your time. There is so much there to inform our ongoing work. It really is very much appreciated.