



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Independent Review of Education  
Panel

19 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for 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:**

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):** Anybody who is observing the Committee should be familiar with the witnesses, but I welcome, in person, Sir Gerry Loughran, the vice-chair of the independent review panel. Also in person, we have Marie Lindsay and Mr Robin McLoughlin, who are panel members. Joining us remotely are Dr Keir Bloomer, the chairperson of the review panel, and Isabel Nisbet, who is a panel member. You are all very welcome.

If there are any issues with the audio or if you are struggling to get in — I might have missed some indications from the two panellists who joined us on Zoom last week — just shout if we do not see the indications.

If we are ready to proceed, I will say that, as with previous evidence sessions, it is very much an open floor. I invite you to make a presentation of up to 10 minutes. We specifically asked for focus on the theme of transitions in the education system and on the wider issue of area planning, which is the more structural aspect of your recommendations. We will then move to questions from members.

We are a bit tighter for time with regard to where we thought we would have got to in the agenda at this stage, so I suggest that questions and answers from members be under five minutes. If we can try to get to questions quickly and make sure that answers are succinct in getting to the nub of the issues, that would be really helpful. There will be a wide range of issues that everyone will want to raise. I will pass over to you for any opening remarks, and then we will go from there.

**Sir Gerry Loughran (Independent Review of Education):** Thank you, Chair. We were discussing this among ourselves, and we felt that some of the things that we said at the last meeting about the funding problem struck a chord with the Committee. We felt that maybe we might use this meeting to build a bit more on what we see as the resource challenges, which are tremendous in scope. If it is OK with the Committee, from time to time, we will deliberately pick on a particular funding problem in any given area that we are talking about, including, for example, the areas that you mentioned, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We are very much in your hands. If budget is a key focus, please continue on that theme.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** OK. May I suggest that we make a start on that by talking about special education? We had very good conversations about special education with you in the previous two meetings, but one thing that we felt that we had not done was bring out the resource issues to the extent that we feel they should have been brought out. Would it be OK to ask Keir to say something about the resource issues in special education?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Absolutely. Over to you, Dr Bloomer.

**Dr Keir Bloomer (Independent Review of Education):** Thank you, Chair. I shall not take long, because we have covered this subject before. As Gerry says, it is essential to emphasise it. When we talked about special needs issues, quite extensively on the first occasion that we met you, the questions from members — there were quite a lot of them — were all concerned with improving the service to young people. That is understandable, and, of course, one of the aspects that we stress in our report is that, at present, the service that is provided to young people is, in many important respects, very unsatisfactory.

It is, however, important to emphasise the other key point that we make in our report, which is that costs are out of control and are escalating extremely rapidly. In 2017-18, expenditure on young people with special educational needs totalled £255 million. By 2022-23, that amount had increased to £479 million, so, in other words, it was not far short of double. When we projected expenditure forward, we thought that it was possible that it would reach over £900 million by 2027-28, which is only three years away.

While we know that this is not the kind of point that is popular — it has absolutely no emotional appeal compared with trying to provide a better service for the young people who need it — the point that we want to make is that, at that kind of level, expenditure on special educational needs will do huge damage to the provision for all other young people. I would have thought that there was little chance that the Executive will simply add year-on-year to the Education budget the amount that is necessary to meet the escalating costs of special educational needs.

By that time, which is three years hence, a third of the budget will be spent on a relatively small proportion of young people and the damage to the system as a whole will be very considerable. What we want to say — we take no pleasure in saying this, but it is essential to stress it — is that that expenditure has got to be brought under control or else the damage to the system will be inestimable.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Dr Bloomer. Do any other panel members wish to add anything on the SEN issue or on SEN budgets in particular?

**Ms Marie Lindsay (Independent Review of Education):** The issue points to the urgent need for the transformation of SEN. Even with it taking up the huge swathe of budget, which Dr Bloomer outlined, the service is not fit for purpose, so we have to address it as a matter of urgency.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you. By way of some opening remarks, I emphasise that the Committee has prioritised SEN. You are right to have picked up on the fact that our questioning has always been focused through the lens of delivering outcomes for children with special educational needs. As a Committee, we have been very clear that our number-one priority is those whom you have referred to in your report as, I think, the "end-user" of the system. It is not really about ensuring that we keep a system running; it is about ensuring that the actual users who access the system at the end have their needs met, and we emphasise that from the perspective of the rights of the child. I want to be very clear about that, because we need to be aware that parents of children with special educational needs will be watching the Committee. Those parents watch the Committee — they watch it religiously, in many cases — because they are so concerned about the impact of a broken system on their children's outcomes. I want to be very clear that we do not want to lose sight of that or to talk

about SEN purely in terms of pounds and pence. I am very clear on that, and I am certain that there is unanimous agreement around the table on that point.

However, the spend is rising exponentially, and my concern is that we are pumping money into a broken system. There is often a sense that you could effectively pay the whole Executive Budget into the health system, yet, in its current state, it is not delivering outcomes for people. I worry that we are perhaps reaching that point with SEN services. If we are pumping money into a broken system that does not deliver for children and is not sustainable, will the panel summarise its recommendations for what the process of transformation might look like so that we can arrive at a system that is fit for purpose and that, when investment goes into it, actually delivers? I will hand over to whoever wants to take that.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** There are two aspects to that. One is the resource that we provide, other than human resource. One feature of special educational needs now is the extent to which people with very specific SEN requirements cannot be provided for in the special schools system. There are waiting lists for people to get into schools. The Minister has said that he wants to build more special schools. If you look at our report, you will see that we estimate the additional capital requirement to be in the region of £400 million. That takes into account not only new schools but the modernisation of some existing schools so that they can have state-of-the-art facilities. It also means creating special education units in the mainstream schools system, which the Minister intends to do. There are very significant capital requirements, which is a fact that is sometimes overlooked when we talk about the SEN resource. We tend to focus on recurrent costs, but the capital requirements are very significant as well.

When it comes to what we can do to improve outcomes, the Audit Office has pointed out that it is not possible to measure outcomes, because the information that would allow us to determine the effect of what we are doing simply is not there. To be clear, I am talking about mainstream education; I am not talking about outcomes in special schools. In mainstream education, it is not really possible to measure outcomes. That is a weakness, because it means that we are not certain that the way that we are spending money can be fully justified by good outcomes.

One of our main recommendations, as you know, is that there should be a significant increase in the number of trained SEN teachers in the mainstream system. That will not happen overnight; it will be a long, drawn-out process. As we have said on other occasions, the report envisages where we want to be in 10 years' time, so if we want to deliver the best possible special education outcomes within 10 years, we have to start the journey now. We need to start to train more special educational needs teachers now — it is feasible — and gradually build that up over time. Even if we wanted to, we could not suddenly start producing hundreds of additional special educational needs teachers each year. It is just not practicable.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I know that Dr Bloomer is looking to come in. Gerry, may I ask a quick question on the back of that?

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Do you envisage that special educational needs teachers will need a specific qualification in that they leave university as a qualified special educational needs teacher who specialises in that area, or do you advocate more provision to equip all teachers who come out of teacher training colleges with the ability to deliver that specialist provision?

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Both.

**Mr Robin McLoughlin (Independent Review of Education):** It is very much both, Chair.

I have other parts to talk about, but you might want to bring in Keir first.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Yes. Does Keir want to come in? *[Pause.]* You are on mute, sorry. *[Long pause.]*

**Dr Bloomer:** Can you hear me?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Yes, that is perfect. Thank you.

**Dr Bloomer:** Good. Thank you.

You put the problem very well, Chair, when you said that we are pumping money into a "broken system". That is exactly the problem, so we have to try to repair the system or initiate new procedures altogether. I direct members' attention, and I suggest strongly that they look at these paragraphs after the meeting is over, to volume 1, paragraph 3.25, which lays out the principles that we think should apply; paragraph 3.28, which details that the ways in which statements are written have to be altered; and, most importantly, paragraph 3.32, which summarises our overall approach.

I will briefly describe paragraph 3.32. The first point that we make there is about the importance of early diagnosis and early intervention, because those are the most effective and most cost-effective ways of dealing with issues in special educational needs. Secondly, we talk about giving primary schools and early years settings better access to expert knowledge in the area, because that is an essential component, obviously, in early intervention. Thirdly, we talk about better equipping the teaching force itself to deal with the issues through, as you just talked about with Gerry, initial teacher education, where there is a need for more stress on SEN, and through subsequent training. Fourthly, and this is very important, we talk about making sure that stages 1 and 2 of the special educational needs process are effective, because the key problem at present is that parents believe that they will not get an effective service for their children until they have got to stage 3, which is when they get a statement. The experience of the system demonstrates that they are, in fact, right on that. Probably the most important single thing that we have to do is make sure that stages 1 and 2 are working more effectively, and that is about the expertise that schools themselves have and their ease of access to other expertise. Lastly, we talk about making better use of the educational psychology service and improving over time — it will be over quite a lot of time, because the training has been extended — the supply and use of educational psychologists. I suggest strongly that those three paragraphs repay some study.

**Ms Lindsay:** May I add to what Keir said? I am thinking of parents of children with special educational needs who may be listening. It is important that we also emphasise the recommendations that we made on transitions, because the transitions for those children are particularly traumatic. We very clearly state a number of times in our report, I think, that those children should not be supernumerate and that their places should be identified at the end of P6. We also made a big recommendation — I know that parents were here earlier today talking about the transition out of education — that all young people should stay in education or training of some form until they are 18. However, we very specifically say in the report that SEN children should be supported beyond that. In one part, we say that they may even need support throughout their life. You said it yourself, Chair: it is about meeting the needs of those children and knowing what their needs are. We very clearly identify transitions as a particular fault line that needs attention, as well as all the things that Keir outlined.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I am glad that you referenced that. Many members of the Committee were at a protest at Stormont today that parents organised, and I pay tribute to Alma and the campaign that she has championed on behalf of her son Caleb. It is about that cliff edge that many children with SEN face when they leave the formal education system. The Committee will look at whether there is need for legislation to protect their journey beyond the formal education system.

Members will want to come in. There may be other aspects of your report that people want to highlight, but, to stay on the theme, Dr Bloomer helpfully highlighted five key aspects of paragraph 3.32 that discuss what the overall approach would need to be. I do not want to oversimplify it, because I know that there is no silver bullet that allows us to do this work and to resolve it. However, is it the panel's view that, if, out of the end-to-end review of SEN, those were the key strands that had clear actions, clear outcomes and a timeline for delivering those aspects, that would go some way to addressing the concerns that you raised today?

**Mr McLoughlin:** My view and, I think, the view of the panel is exactly that. To add to what Keir said, paragraph 3.32 articulates our vision. Early intervention is the silver bullet, and we have to ensure that there is the investment in that early intervention in special schools and mainstream schools and for equipping the workforce. We talked about the teaching workforce, but we need to talk about the whole workforce in order to ensure that we have an appropriate workforce. Keir mentioned educational psychologists, but a plethora of other professionals is needed in order to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose and, going back to your comments at the start, that meets the needs of all children in our education system so that we ensure that we can have that.

There is no silver bullet that will fix this quickly, but we need to start with training and investment. We need to ensure that we have specialist schools in the right regions, and I give credit to the Minister for putting that plan in place. Those schools then need to lead with their expertise into mainstream schools, with every teacher in mainstream education being part of the solution, particularly at stage 1 and stage 2.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** If we are talking about that whole journey from early intervention through to leaving the formal education system, we need Health and Economy to buy into it. It cannot just be Education. Frustratingly, we on this Committee are struggling to get a sense of what the plan is for meaningful collaboration. We are struggling to get to that, and I think that it is essential.

I do not want to hog too much more time, because I know that other members want to come in, and I want to leave a bit of time for other issues. I will bring in the Deputy Chair, and anyone else can indicate.

**Mr Sheehan:** Some journalists picked up comments on budgets and finance that were made last week, and Nolan picked up on them and did a programme on Friday about our being close to the precipice and the system being close to bankruptcy and so on. Yet, you say in your report that all the recommendations are "costed and achievable", and you outlined some of the investment that is needed. You also said that we need £155 million to address the per pupil funding gap, that there is a £136 million shortfall in relation to special needs and a capital allocation of £25 million for an estimated period of five years for SEN facilities. We also have the pay and grading review hanging over everything at the minute, as well as whatever it costs to implement the recommendations that the panel has come up with. Where are we going to get finance for that?

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** The problem starts right now, by the way, in the current year. There are significant gaps in the budget that was allocated to the Department for the current year. There is a gap of £223 million for inescapables. Those are services that, by definition, must be delivered, but, as I said, there is a funding gap of £223 million. The Department estimates that there is a further £250 million of anticipated pressures. That probably means the pay settlement, to which you just referred, Pat. We do not know what that will be, by the way. There has been some speculation about it. The Department is providing for an assumed pay settlement, and the potential cost of that is included in the £250 million. The Department has therefore started this year with really significant underfunding.

Robin, do you want to come in?

**Mr McLoughlin:** Yes. You are absolutely right, Pat when you ask from where the money is going to come. That is an issue for the Executive. We are highlighting, and have highlighted in paragraph 10.9 on page 90 of volume 1 of the report, the fact that there is, as Gerry articulated:

*"a funding pressure of over £500m in 2024/25."*

**Mr Sheehan:** From where are the Executive going to get that money, Robin? Every Department is under pressure. From where are the Executive going to get the funding to implement the recommendations here and get the extra money that you have talked about to address how per pupil funding here compares with that in England and Wales?

**Mr McLoughlin:** We looked at the funding in those jurisdictions versus the funding here, and we found that children here have been underfunded and that the education system in Northern Ireland is underfunded. When we did a further comparison with other jurisdictions, the position was exactly the same. Those figures have been articulated. You ask from where in the Executive Budget the money will come. A potential question for your political colleagues is whether you decide to fund the education system from other government sources. We are articulating that our students, pupils and young people are underfunded. That is the scale of our evidence, based on statistical facts and the funding arrangements in those other places. As Gerry outlined —

**Mr Sheehan:** I am sorry for cutting across you, Robin. There is no point in telling us that there is a shortfall in funding, because we all know that. We also know that we are in a very challenging budgetary period, and we have been for the past 11 or 12 years under the Tory Government. There is no point in coming up with recommendations that say, "Let's give every child £100 tomorrow morning", because we know that the money is not there. In effect, is that not what you are saying in the report's

recommendations? You are asking for things that really cannot be delivered because of the challenging situation that we are in and that we have been in for the past number of years.

One of the figures in your report states that we are £145 million down over the past 11 years. That is a 6% decrease in real terms. Who is responsible for that? The answer is the Tory Government in London. We sit beside another jurisdiction, which is 30 miles down the road, on a tiny island. The education system there is miles ahead of our system. If someone from outer space were to look at the two education systems and at what is happening in the South versus what is happening in the North, how would you explain the difference?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Time is very short for a response. Robin, do you want to respond? Marie, I know that you were indicated that you wanted to come in.

**Ms Lindsay:** I think that that question was to Robin.

**Mr McLoughlin:** I will answer it briefly.

We are pointing out the funding difference between our jurisdiction and other jurisdictions. Our recommendations are costed. The funding issues that have been articulated are already there, before you start to include any recommendations from our report. It is therefore not a case of our recommendations costing £500 million. That is not what we are saying. That £500 million pressure is there today.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Marie, do you want to come in?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** You can come in, Pat, very briefly.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go ahead, Marie. Sorry.

**Ms Lindsay:** OK. You will remember that I said last week that the cost of not investing is more expensive than what we are proposing. We are spending £536 million per annum on mopping up where education has failed. We are putting forward a 20-year vision for transforming education, and that requires investment. Yes, there is a problem with getting the money. Not getting the money is not a solution, however, because, by not investing, you will be paying a lot more down the line to meet the needs of those young people and to try to address societal ills. Although there is a funding crisis, this is about investing. The return to individuals, society, our community and Northern Ireland plc will put us on a footing with our neighbour. What the Republic of Ireland has done in the past 15 years is down to investment. It is so simple. The Republic of Ireland invested in education and continues to invest.

**Mr Sheehan:** You will not get any disagreement from anyone on the Committee in that regard. The education system needs investment, the health system needs investment and infrastructure needs investment. We do not have the money to invest, however. In a situation in which we are not getting the funding, what does the Minister do? How does he prioritise his funding? Into what does he put it?

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Our remit, as you know, was to look at the education system as a whole, but our remit is really diagnostic. We have been trying to identify what is happening and what might change for the better. That is a diagnostic approach, but you are asking us for a prognosis. That goes beyond our remit and into the hands of the Assembly, which you represent.

**Mr Sheehan:** I do not think that the Assembly is at fault here, but I will leave it there.

**Mr Baker:** Pat's line of questioning was the path that I was going to go down today. We know that we need to invest in order to save, but we cannot do that if we do not have the money with which to invest. We see the challenges that we are facing after 14 years of austerity. Look across the water and see the damage that has been done in parts of England by Tory policy.

I will make one point about post-19 provision. We have the Autism (Amendment) Act 2022, which is about providing lifelong learning and social opportunities throughout a person's whole life, yet it has not been implemented either. That raises a further problem. From early interventions come lifelong opportunities, but, in order to provide those opportunities, we have to invest. You are not going to get any argument here from us. There are recommendations in reports that are sitting on shelves. It is

frustrating, and the situation will make the job difficult for any Minister, because the problem lies not with us in the Assembly but across the water.

**Mr McLoughlin:** I do not think that you will get disagreement from the panel either. We see the lack of investment, we see the damage and we see the issues. We articulated the issues in the previous two sessions that we had with the Committee.

Our recommendations are costed. They are for additional investment. There is already an impact today. Pat, you asked a very good question about where we spend the money now. It goes back to Marie's comments. By not investing, damage is being done daily, weekly and yearly to the education of young people in Northern Ireland and to all the opportunities that should be available to them. Alongside that, there is a need to understand that there are pressures now and that those pressures are unavoidable. Money will have to come from somewhere to fund them.

A simple example is the pay awards for teaching and non-teaching staff, which are fully deserved to ensure that the rate of pay here is comparable to other jurisdictions. Money has to come to fund those awards, because the money does not exist in the system. That is a challenge for the Executive, and I absolutely agree, Pat, that it is a challenge for the Treasury. There is a need to have discussions with the Treasury, because Northern Ireland does not appear to have the money that it needs to run the quality of education system that is being run currently. We then have a series of recommendations that set out the additional costs and additional moneys that are needed in order to improve the system.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Although there are long-term savings, sometimes you have to spend in order to save.

**Ms Lindsay:** We highlight inefficiencies in the system as well, but tackling those will not meet the level of deficit that we currently face. When we talk about the need for funding and investment, we have to call out the inefficiencies, and we have done that.

**Mr McLoughlin:** I think that we agree.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** David, you have a quick comment to make, and I will then bring you in again later.

**Mr Brooks:** You said earlier, Chair, that there are similarities with the health service. When this place was being re-established, the British Government were pushing quite hard the idea that we could get it up and running and that it would be great to see transformation in the health service, but that also applies to education. That is exactly the point. If we want to see money being saved in the long term, that transformation piece needs upfront investment as well. All parties will be pressing that matter with the British Government.

**Mr McLoughlin:** May I pick up on a point that Marie mentioned? Transformation is absolutely needed. We have highlighted the transformation that we believe is needed. We touched on that, but the savings from transformation do not come anywhere close to picking up the cost of the education system. In our analysis, which is based on looking at other jurisdictions, education in Northern Ireland is underfunded. Transformation will save some money, but it will not come close to meeting the costs that need to be met in order for our system to have a similar rate of investment to that that is received by other children on this island and children in Scotland, England and Wales. The tables showing the difference in funding per student are in chapter 10 of volume 2 of the report.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** One thing occurs to me, which I will make as a comment. Ultimately, the decision on how much to spend per pupil is for the Minister to take. It is not necessarily about the top line of the budget. The Minister gets his top line, and there are then choices to be made to ensure that money gets to pupils. I am not downplaying the fact that those choices are difficult choices, but we have to be clear that there are choices to be made. There are things on which we can spend money in the system and things that we can choose not to spend money on. As I said, those are difficult decisions, but we need to emphasise that point.

**Mr McLoughlin:** That is why it is incredibly important that we highlight today the fact that there are difficult decisions to be made. Although the challenges that the Department of Health faces have



possibly been covered much more in the media, the Department of Education will be in exactly the same position unless there is sufficient money in the system.

**Ms Nicholl:** It is nice to see you all again. At our previous session with you, you talked about the importance of listening to young people's voices. Three students joined me this week, and they have written the questions that I will ask you today. There are three questions, and I would really appreciate it if we could cover all three of them in my five-minute slot. Those students have read the review, and these are their questions.

The first question is from Maeve, who has just done her AS levels at Strathearn School. She was struck by the finding that a third of students have seriously considered suicide and asks what can be done to reduce pressure in school or to fix students' lack of self-belief.

The second question comes from Jess, who goes to Regent House School. She was looking at the funding that is relevant to this issue. Paragraph 10.52 of volume 2 of the report details the fact that the review identified:

*"32 pairs of primary schools which were of different management type ... and located less than one mile apart and more than three miles by road from other schools of the same management type. In 26 of these pairs, at least one of the schools was not sustainable."*

We talked about that a bit, and Jess wanted to know, if we were to fix that, what would happen to the workforce and to the number of teachers. She also wanted to know how you would address that.

The final question is from Chloe, who is in year 11 at Lagan College. She is really interested in new people coming to Northern Ireland. Given the increasing diversity here and the growing number of families who are moving here from different countries, what is your view on how the Department is meeting the educational needs of the children who relocate here? She asked that you please provide information on language support initiatives that promote cultural understanding and on any additional assistance that is provided.

Those questions are therefore about mental health, impact on the workforce where there is duplication, and newcomers to Northern Ireland.

**Ms Lindsay:** I will take Maeve's question, because —.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** May I come in quickly? It is great to hear young people feeding questions directly to the Committee. That may be the first time that we have had that, other than at bespoke youth sessions. I ask that one panel member answer each of the questions thoroughly, so that each gets a proper airing.

**Ms Lindsay:** I know Maeve, and she bakes very good birthday cakes, so I will answer her question. *[Laughter.]* I did not know that she would be here today or that she was asking a question, so I will definitely answer her question.

Maeve's question was on mental health, the pressure that young people are under, well-being and so on. When we met young people, those issues were to the fore for every single one of them. Their own mental health and that of their cohort concerned them greatly. Schools are taking the issue seriously. I have said before at the Committee that the Department of Education has a very good well-being framework, which has been endorsed by the mental health champion, who said that it is fit for purpose and does a good job. The problem, however, is that many schools do not see it as being of high value when it comes to looking at what schools have achieved. There are tools available for building resilience and promoting well-being in schools, and work has been done in the background. When well-being hits a crisis point in a school, schools focus on it, but then it is back to the busyness of exams — as it has been in the past month — outcomes and all those kinds of things. That needs to shift. We have to understand that a well-educated young person also needs to be a well-rounded young person, and young people need to have the capacity to cope with the challenges that life throws at them. Life will throw many challenges at those wonderful young people who are here at the Committee and at others who are listening in.

First and foremost, we need to prioritise well-being in the curriculum. That is what young people told us. It needs to have better value. More pastoral care is required. It is crucial that every school have direct access to crisis counselling, and that can be done, and at not that high a cost. That would make

a huge difference, because the staff in schools feel overwhelmed. They are not trained counsellors, and that one fix would make a huge difference when schools reach a crisis point. Let us prioritise building up the resilience of our young people.

I have seen excellent programmes that schools are doing on social media. The issue is coming more to the fore because young people are using their voice. Well done to Maeve for raising the issue. She also mentioned school pressures. We make interesting recommendations around the curriculum and the pressures that young people are under. First, we say that there are too many GCSEs and that there is too much unnecessary content. Secondly, young people encounter closed doors — that is what I will call them — and cannot progress. We talk a lot about a pathway, or many pathways, along which young people see that they can continue to progress. That would take off some of the pressure that arises, because all kinds of pressure are created, particularly once students hit GCSE or AS level, where Maeve is at. At that age, young people find that they are being asked to go out and find another path, because the particular path of school is not working for them. It is therefore important that those recommendations be taken on board — hopefully, doing that will ease the pressure — and that we will build up young people's resilience and attach more priority to it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** My phone is struggling to find silent mode. Perhaps its ringing indicates that we may be moving towards a bell. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Lindsay:** Sorry.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We are running out of time, so we will need to cover the other two questions really quickly. Please be brief.

**Mr McLoughlin:** Those are brilliant questions from our young people. It is great to see them here today. Well done. I will add one thing to what Marie said. Qualifications also need to change. That links to the content, the assessment schemes and the workload placed on young people and our teaching profession. We need a radical change to our curriculum and to our qualifications to ensure that well-being is taken into account.

I will cover the second question briefly.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** You will have to, unfortunately.

**Mr McLoughlin:** The question was about funding. We may come back to area planning in more depth in answer to other questions. We have articulated a vision for area planning in the paper, and the numbers are covered in chapter 10. You referenced primary schools and their amalgamation. There is a rationalisation for it and a cost saving from doing so, but it is not that much. There is also the benefit of social cohesion, through ensuring that a village or small town has a mixed community. There is the curriculum offer, an appropriate extracurricular offer and an appropriate pastoral care offer. Those result in a better school and a better educational experience for young people from all faiths, and none, who go to the school.

Within that, there will be an impact on the workforce. We are struggling for workforce in teaching, so, with larger schools and schools with specialisms, there is a lot of opportunity. I therefore do not see it as a case of people losing their job as a result of amalgamation. That is not where we find ourselves with the teaching profession at the minute, as we are struggling to get specialist teachers.

Keir may want to pick up on the question about newcomers to Northern Ireland.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** The third question, yes. I invite Keir, or whoever else wants to come in, to respond.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** I have one line on funding that follows on from what Robin was saying. The problem —

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It definitely needs to be one line, Gerry.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** The problem is that funding follows the children. You will still have the same number of children, no matter what the configuration of schools. There are therefore not going to be tremendous savings made, but, as Robin said, the benefits are mostly educational.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I ask for a really brief reply to the third question. I know that these are all important issues, and Committee members will want to show a bit of latitude, as this is the last time that we will have you with us for a while. I will hand over to Keir.

**Dr Bloomer:** I will deal with it very briefly. There are enormous educational benefits from bringing newcomers to Northern Ireland. I may have mentioned last week the London Challenge, which is the most successful campaign so far anywhere in the UK to improve educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. The success of the London Challenge was down to a number of factors, with schools supporting one another being probably the single most important one. The second most important factor was the influence of immigrant children and the fact that there are a very large number of them in London.

There is therefore everything to be said for bringing in large numbers of newcomer children if at all possible, but the corollary to that is that language support needs to be improved.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thanks to the students who provided those questions.

**Ms Brownlee:** I will touch on communication in the SEN process and on transition. We were at an event recently that SEN Reform NI had organised, and one of the recommendations out of it was on communication around the SEN process. It is paper-based. There are also emails and telephone calls involved, and a lot of it is lost in translation. There is stress and anxiety around the process.

SEN Reform NI suggested digitising the process to make it more streamlined, to encourage communication and so that it can be monitored right the way through. Is that something that you have looked at or would recommend? I understand that doing that would require investment, but do you see a benefit from improving the communication system for parents?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I am happy to start, and I will then hand over to Marie. We do not quite get to that level of operational detail, for obvious reasons, in our report, but anything that improves communication of the process is to be welcomed. Anything that makes it easier for parents and the children who are going through the process is to be welcomed. Anything that we can do to help educational outcomes for young people is to be welcomed.

In a sense, doing that is one part of making it a process that is better understood. At the start, Keir said that, at each of our sessions with the Committee, parents unfortunately believe that they get help only when their child is statemented, and that is true.

We need to change what we do at stages 1 and 2. That is despite the best efforts of schools and colleagues in the Education Authority (EA) trying their hardest to do the best that they can with the system that is in place. There are, however, massive issues for our young people and their parents. We may come back to the Chair's point about the cliff edge when young people come to leave school. We need to change, and communication is a crucial aspect of that change.

The paragraph that Keir referenced earlier outlined the changes that are needed, but if those are not well communicated, we will not get the necessary benefits for our young people and the changes that will lead to better educational outcomes for our young people.

**Ms Brownlee:** I appreciate that. We have spoken to so many parents, and there is confusion around the whole process, with telephone calls, emails, letters and more letters involved. They do not know where they sit in the process, so to have something that they can refer to would improve the process for everyone.

**Ms Lindsay:** If I were a parent going through that process, I would welcome digitisation, but I would also want somebody on the end of the phone who knows my case and to whom I can go so that I do not have to repeat everything. Although I completely welcome digitisation and see how it could improve things, parents, carers or other representatives of those young people need a trusted voice who knows their case so that they are not repeating everything.

The minute that you mentioned communication, what jumped out in my head was that, prior to this, there was no link between the Department of Health and the Department of Education in the early identification piece. Inroads are being made there, but, on communication, it is about joining up the information around the children and the support services. There needs to be that kind of wrap-around. You need a lot of people who have information about the children sharing on a need-to-know basis

what is in their best interests so that they can better meet those children's needs. Yes, you can have digitisation by all means, but the families need a trusted person who knows their case, to give them answers and sometimes to help them wade through the plethora of information that comes through. Digitisation would help with that.

**Mr McLoughlin:** One comment that came to mind when Marie was speaking is that it needs to be done early. It comes back to our recommendation that the placements should be sorted out over the year in advance, not at the last minute, because that adds to the communication issue.

**Ms Brownlee:** I appreciate that. The Chair has touched on the cliff-edge approach, and we have also referred to it. I know from my constituency work that it is the community and the voluntary sector that are doing the heavy lifting for SEN people once they leave the education system. They are the first port of call for funding cuts, and then that service is taken away from under them. That threat is felt every year. I might be asking you a difficult question, but what are your thoughts on that?

**Mr McLoughlin:** Our thoughts are articulated in the report. I will not be personal, because I have a very close colleague who is in exactly that situation. We need to look at a training model in the regional colleges to provide an educational pathway that continues.

One Committee member mentioned potential legislative change. We need to look at providing appropriate pathways and provision for the most vulnerable in our society. The fact that they have reached the age of 19 is not relevant; they need an appropriate pathway to have a full life. As a society, we have to provide appropriate pathways.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** The Committee has been clear that we will take that issue forward after the summer recess and look at it in a bit more detail.

**Mr Baker:** We actually have legislation: it is in the Autism Act, but it sits there without being implemented. That is the point that I was making earlier.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I have a final point that follows on from Cheryl's. We have talked about the challenge of the lack of communication with parents in the system. I received a written answer this week that confirmed that the average caseload for a SEN link officer is 899 pupils. I find that number staggering.

**Ms Lindsay:** It is a whole-workforce issue.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It does not seem sustainable for a single member of staff to manage that. Not every one of those pupils will require day-to-day contact, but at the key transition points a caseload like that becomes unsustainable. There is a live bid for investment and perhaps recruitment, but it feels as if there is a very big hill to climb to the level of investment that we need.

**Mr McLoughlin:** That goes back to our point about investment in an appropriate workforce to meet the needs.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Yes. The workforce can also be in those arm's-length bodies, because they are providing that direct interface with parents.

**Mr McLoughlin:** Absolutely. As we have said, sometimes there is a belief that it is just teachers. It is not: it is the whole system.

**Ms Lindsay:** Their well-being is important, as well as that of the children and young people. You have to think about the well-being of somebody who has that caseload.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Absolutely. I hear from senior EA officials that they are very aware that staff in those roles are under huge pressure.

**Mr McLoughlin:** Something that we may not have said as a panel, although Committee members may have, is that the vast majority of people in the SEN system in schools and the EA are trying really hard and working really hard. They are well meaning and well intentioned. It is a very difficult position:

we have to look after the most vulnerable in our society, but we need to be honest about the efforts that a lot of people put in.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It goes back to the point that those people probably feel that they spend most of their time labouring to administer a broken system. That is the cycle that we need to break.

**Mr Brooks:** We probably need to give some consideration to what we have discussed about the third sector and the elements that relate to the economy. In respect of this Committee leading on legislation and so on, there is probably a conversation to be had with other affected Committees about where it properly sits. At the minute it appears to be more of an Economy issue, but there definitely needs to be more joint working on it in general. That is a common theme to much of what we have discussed: where it actually sits.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I agree. It speaks to the difficulty that the Committee has had in understanding who owns the collaboration piece. If it comes from the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015, Education owns it, but the specific policy interventions may sit with other Departments.

**Mr McLoughlin:** We noted from the minutes of our first session that you had written, potentially through the Clerk, to the Economy Committee and the Health Committee. We are very keen to engage on the wider piece.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is vital. It cannot sit in a silo.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** May I make a suggestion, Chair? It would be more productive if it were a joint meeting. We cover the whole spectrum, but as our conversations over three meetings have demonstrated, we are looking at issues outside the remit of your Committee. I think it would be productive to have a wider conversation, if possible.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It is often said that children do not exist in silos. Children do not exist within the Committee structure of the Assembly, or the Executive either. If we are to tackle these issues, we need to find ways around that.

Do you have a question, David? I will have to give you a wee bit less time, as you have come in a couple of times.

**Mr Brooks:** That is no problem: I have only one question.

I want to return to the issue of sustainable sixth forms. Last week, we touched on the tertiary college idea, which I like. I know that it will concern some people, but I can see the arguments around the need for rationalisation of sixth forms. You have talked about establishing community sixth forms. There are others who are not in favour of wholesale reorganisation, but who want to look at what exists. In an ideal world, would it be better for sixth forms to sit separately from schools? What is the vision?

**Mr McLoughlin:** No, we are not proposing that sixth forms sit separately from schools, even though there may be examples of a sixth form separate from a school. On pages 91 and 92 of volume 1 of our report, you will find an outline of the numbers that we are talking about. The sixth-form enrolment numbers are 120 per year group, making 240, which would lead to a substantial change in the number of sixth forms. There would be 22 new jointly managed community post-primary schools and 56 new sixth forms. That is quite a substantial change at sixth form.

A member asked about the educational benefits. If you have a sixth form of an appropriate size, it is about the curriculum on offer, the pastoral care and the extracurricular and co-curricular activities; it is about the experience of sixth form, which is how it should be. That is a substantial change in the system and the structure of sixth forms. Most of those sixth forms, however, will be within an existing school; they will not necessarily be new sixth forms.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** But there may be a case in a particular area for a sixth-form college as part of the transformation.

**Mr Brooks:** That would generally be the exception rather than the rule, you would think.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Let us put it this way: it is a huge change in and of itself, to the extent that people will have to volunteer for change. Maybe it is best to give them as much flexibility and scope as possible.

**Ms Hunter:** David, you stole my question. How dare you? *[Laughter.]* Welcome back, and thank you so much. I, too, have a question about sixth forms. In my constituency, and even when I was at school, so many people who wanted to do art or media have had to go elsewhere, whether because of diary clashes or for other reasons. I suppose you have answered my question about your perspective on that, but I have an additional question off the back of it.

I am aware that the Health Committee will shortly meet its Southern counterpart. Do you think it would be beneficial for the Education Committee to meet our Southern counterpart? I am mindful that there may be opportunities to talk about sixth forms on a cross-border basis, particularly for schools in the border counties. Is there something there that we could explore?

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** We do not really feel competent to give the Committee advice on how to handle that, but I can say that we had significant interaction with colleagues in the South as part of our own learning process. Isabel may want to say something about that, because I know that she spent some time in Dublin. It is a dimension that we think is very important and worth taking into account. Obviously, because Keir and Isabel are based across the water, we have a Great Britain dimension, but what you say is absolutely right. Isabel, would you like to say anything?

**Ms Isabel Nisbet (Independent Review of Education):** The answer is yes: not exclusively in the South, but because the areas of curriculum and qualifications and how to widen opportunities for young people to progress are high in the awareness of education authorities across the kingdom and in the South. In particular, important work has been done in the South on the qualifications at 16 and at school-leaving age. They are not the same as in UK countries, but there is commonality. A big report is about to come out in the South on the role of teachers in assessment, which will be of huge relevance. There have been reviews of the curriculum in Scotland and Wales, and there are new suggestions about work on the curriculum in some manifestos for the UK election.

At paragraph 4.24 on page 41 of volume 1 of our report, we set out what we think are the priorities for starting work on the curriculum now. Those are hugely important, but that does not mean that you shut your eyes to what is going on elsewhere. It is exactly the kind of thing that should be done with full awareness not only of similar work being done elsewhere, but of the distinctive needs in Northern Ireland.

**Dr Bloomer:** May I come in, in answer to David's earlier question?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Feel free, and then I will bring Cara back in. I will give you a bit of extra time, Cara.

**Dr Bloomer:** David's question relates to what we are saying about area planning and the review of the schools estate, of which the rationalisation of sixth forms is a part. You were intending to discuss that this afternoon anyway, and we consider it an extremely important part of our report. It has three distinct aspects that come together in a very beneficial way.

One aspect is cost-effectiveness. We feel that if the education service is to seek additional resources, it has to be able to demonstrate that it is making the best possible use of the resources that it already has. At present, it cannot do that for the school estate. There is duplication and waste. Rationalising the school estate is therefore an extremely important priority that would yield not insignificant revenue savings over time and would have some implications for capital expenditure.

That is where our interest in this topic started, but as we progressed we added two other dimensions. One is about educational improvement — making sure that every educational institution can provide a wide and appropriate curriculum. That is not true in schools or sixth forms that are too small.

It is very much in the interests of young people that the school estate be reconfigured in a way that enables every school to offer an appropriate and broad curriculum. There is space for innovative solutions, including sixth-form colleges. We are not recommending a changeover from school provision to sixth-form college provision in any wholesale way, but we think that there is space for innovative solutions in particular places, depending on the geography and other factors.

The third element of this bringing together is about learning together. We think that a review of the school estate will make it much easier for young people to be taught in contexts that allow them to learn alongside others from different community backgrounds and religious backgrounds. Again, there is scope for innovation, and that is where our new community schools come in.

The idea of reviewing the school estate combines those three elements — cost-effectiveness, educational viability and learning together — and is therefore an extremely important part of our report, in our view. It is not an easy thing to do. We are suggesting that a specialised independent commission be set up to undertake an overall review of the position in Northern Ireland over a couple of years or so. It will be controversial, because school amalgamations are always controversial, but the benefits could be great indeed.

**Ms Hunter:** That is really helpful feedback. An issue that has come up in my constituency is about young students who want to learn and engage with the Irish language. One constituent, a really articulate young lady who is passionate about the Irish language and wanted to do the A level, had to go as far as Derry to be accommodated.

**Ms Lindsay:** I highly recommend what Isabel said about learning from other jurisdictions. Pat referred last week to the delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) programme. There are lessons there on addressing disadvantage. Isabel is right that there has been real reform of the curriculum and qualifications in the South, but the DEIS schools' work to address disadvantage is also worth looking at — not to replicate it, but to see how they have made it work by putting in the resource and the accountability that goes with it. They are addressing things like attendance, retention and transitions, as well as literacy outcomes and exam success.

The other key part of a DEIS school is the partnership with the parent or carer and with others involved in meeting young learners' needs. With SEN, which will be a focus for the Committee, there is some best practice to consider elsewhere. We had some excellent presentations on inclusion from other parts of Europe and from Los Angeles. There is lots of good work going on, not for us to replicate but to look at, read about and draw out the parts that might work here, so I encourage you to go ahead.

**Ms Hunter:** That is really helpful. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I am very happy with the direction that you have taken us in; it has been a really helpful conversation today.

We will be having the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in. If members will indulge me, I have one question on area planning, which is one of its key functions in the maintained sector.

You have articulated that a change is needed to deliver the rightsizing of the school estate. Is it your assessment — I will put my cards on the table and say that it is mine, but I am interested to hear whether you agree — that the current system of area planning does not really have the capacity for that? That is not a criticism of any of the people involved in the system; it is just how it is structured.

At the end of any process, the Minister has substantial power to effectively overrule a decision, as he did recently, flying in the face of the recommendations that came forward. Is it the panel's view that an independent commission is the only place we can start with reform? That is effectively my view, but I am not putting words into your mouth.

**Mr McLoughlin:** We have the answer to your question on pages 86 and 87 of volume 1:

*"In the short term, we recommend the establishment of an Independent Planning Commission".*

That is for exactly the reason that you have articulated: that it seems to be a slow process. That is nobody's fault, but it is where we find ourselves.

To go back to what Keir articulated about the sixth form, there is a need to rightsize the schools estate so that we have the best educational provision for our young people. That is across all schools — special as well as mainstream. That is why we have said "In the short term": because it does not require legislative change to put the shoulder to the wheel with that independent planning commission, which could come up with a Northern Ireland-wide plan for a new network of schools. Some may be easy, but others will be difficult. As we all know, amalgamating schools, closing some and building

others or moving to new sites is a challenge, and there are capital works that go with that. At paragraph 9.34, we say:

*"The longer-term solution for area planning would see the establishment of a single strategic planning authority".*

That is to avoid the problems that you articulated in your question and to ensure capacity for an effective area planning structure as we go forward.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** It is envisaged — in our report, anyway — that the ultimate decision would be the Minister's, because there has to be proper accountability. The Minister is accountable to the Assembly, but you need to ensure that the ultimate accountability for decision-making of that kind is with the Minister, as is currently provided for in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Yes, ultimately the final decisions are political decisions. My interest is in ensuring that when those decisions are taken, the rationale is clearly articulated. That is perhaps lacking: there is the capacity to make those decisions with no articulated rationale. I do not think that that represents a robust process, but that is purely my view.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** I suppose it is more likely that the Minister would take account of a completely independent commission that was fully professional. One thing that we say about that body is that it should be made up of experienced professional educationalists.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** The independence is key.

We could talk all afternoon, but I am conscious of time. Do you want to make a final point, Robin?

**Mr McLoughlin:** Could I highlight a point that goes back to David's comment about savings? The savings are summarised in paragraph 9.32. That was a desktop exercise, and we are realistic about the fact that not all those savings will be made, but it is about all the other benefits that Keir has articulated.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Keir, do you want to come in? It is probably appropriate that any final remarks come from you.

**Dr Bloomer:** Thank you. You have asked two clear questions. On whether we agree with you that the present area planning process is not working, the answer is yes; on whether we need something like an independent commission, the answer is also yes. Those are two short answers for you.

Thank you all very much for the three sessions that we have had with you. We are absolutely delighted that you are taking our report seriously and that you have given us the time that you have given. We hope that you have found the sessions worthwhile; we certainly have. We remain happy to engage further with you if it would be useful.

I remind you of Sir Gerry Loughran's suggestion arising from our concern that we are not getting the same degree of interest from the Department for the Economy; we have not had a meeting with the Minister, for example. We would certainly welcome the opportunity to take part in a meeting with the two Committees so that we could look at the areas of our report that are outwith your remit and at those that overlap with the areas of responsibility of the two Departments and the two Committees. We are extremely interested in that suggestion.

I will stop there. Once again, thank you for the interest that you have taken. I hope that you have found the sessions worthwhile.

**Sir Gerry Loughran:** Before we conclude, Chair, I would like to mention one area that we intended but did not have the opportunity to cover today, because it should be of great interest to the Committee in future.

The Education capital budget for major projects has not exceeded £50 million in any of the past five years. The Department estimates that the highest level of spend on major capital in the next five years will be only £50 million, yet we have a whole stack of major projects lined up, including the £400



million for special education that I mentioned. The Department estimates that, at the current level of capital funding, it would take 44 years to achieve all the outcomes that have been determined and announced. That is not workable. You used the word "prioritised" earlier, and you were quite right: we will not be able to fund everything, so there will have to be prioritisation.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** May I extend the Committee's thanks for the time that you have given us? Our discussions have been really wide-ranging and have given us an awful lot of food for thought for the remainder of the mandate. Your suggestion about concurrent engagement with the other relevant Committees is a good one that we will definitely consider.

I hope that this will not be the last engagement that we have. We await the Department's response and recommendations on the review and what can be taken forward. That may well be an opportune time to engage again. Thank you for your time.