



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by the Transforming Local Youth  
Work in NI Collective

26 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Briefing by the Transforming Local Youth Work in NI Collective

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

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

**Witnesses:**

|                   |                         |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Mr Michial Dudley | Boys & Girls Clubs (NI) |
| Mr Stephen Dallas | The Bytes Project       |
| Ms Sheila Morris  | Youth Action NI         |
| Mr Tony Silcock   | Youth Initiatives NI    |
| Mr John Lynch     | Youth Work Alliance     |

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Good afternoon, everybody. You are welcome to the last meeting of the Education Committee in the session. It is great to have you here and to have a collective group representing non-statutory youth provision across Northern Ireland. That is welcome. The Committee has been keen to hear the voice of the sectors that you represent. It is great to have you here.

I will run through who we have in attendance. If I miss anybody, let me know, but you are all welcome to do your own intro when we get to you. We have Sheila Morris from Youth Action NI; John Lynch from Youth Work Alliance; Michial Dudley from Boys & Girls Clubs NI; Stephen Dallas from the Bytes Project; and Tony Silcock from Youth Initiatives NI. There may well be others who are not on my list, so I apologise if I have missed any of them. Please make your own introductions when we come to you.

At this stage, I will hand over to you to make any opening remarks or presentation that you want to make. I suggest that that will take up to 10 minutes, but that is by no means a target. If you do not need to use the full 10 minutes, that is fine. We will then move to questions and answers. The approach that we usually take is to give members five minutes each for their question and answer. I urge members and witnesses to get to questions and answers as promptly as they can, because there will be a lot of interest in the subject. Over to you; I do not know who wants to kick off.

**Mr Stephen Dallas (The Bytes Project):** Thanks very much for the opportunity to present our paper on transforming local youth work in Northern Ireland. I am the chief executive of the Bytes Project. I will let the rest of the guys introduce themselves, because it is good to put a face to the name.

**Mr Michial Dudley (Boys & Girls Clubs (NI)):** I am CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs (Northern Ireland).

**Ms Sheila Morris (Youth Action NI):** I am senior leader for Youth Action Northern Ireland.

**Mr John Lynch (Youth Work Alliance):** I am CEO of Youth Work Alliance.

**Mr Tony Silcock (Youth Initiatives NI):** I am CEO of Youth Initiatives Northern Ireland.

**Mr Dallas:** Our entourage are not Swifties. *[Laughter.]* They are here with us from all areas. This is a big group; it is not just us. If you had 15 seats, you would have 15 people in a row making their contribution. I will take a couple of minutes to make an introduction to give a bit of context.

We are delighted to be here today to present our paper. In our regional role to support youth work, we are funded by the Education Authority's (EA) regional strategic funding. That is the funding pot. That means that we provide support with governance, workforce and the curriculum. That will give you a wee bit of context, because it is important that you have that as we go through and justify what we are all trying to say today.

Initially, in 2023, a couple of us tried to have a conversation about how we could support the local groups more effectively. That is what we were doing. It is fair to say that, at that point, it was quite competitive. We did not talk too much to each other, and we were trying to close ranks and look after our own patch. That started to fall off in April, May and June last year. John and the guys in Youth Work Alliance have been engaging with the Education Authority and DE for a long time on the local services that they want to see, but it is fair to say that we did not have one, single-threaded message. We do today. What you have in your hand is our contribution to trying to find solutions for our youth work in the region. In the meeting of minds that we had, one thing that helped us to feel connected was the idea that we all really care about maximising what youth services can access in the region. That is the silver thread. It is important to say that.

A few weeks ago, we heard the input of the independent review of education panel, who were at the Committee. It was great. Hopefully, we will measure up, but we will see how that goes. The panel spoke a lot about the need for a youth services budget. In the paper, they talked about almost doubling it. That would be awesome. If you could deliver that, we would be very content, but you cannot. The Minister has been clear that you guys are dealing with a constrained budget. We need to look at this in a new way. We need to deliver things in a different way, and that will require collective thinking from the community and voluntary sector and the EA. To be clear, with the way that things are currently laid out, we think that influence over our planning and investment lies solely with the EA. That is part of what you will see in our paper, and it is a really important point to talk about as we go through the session.

Why are we here today? I will be clear about what we are as a group and a network. You had our uniform colleagues here a couple of weeks ago. They were really good. They will be sitting at home tonight scoring us, and they will text us as well, I am sure. We are all united with the uniform sector in what we do to support children and young people. Our network is slightly different in what we support. You might have a 20-week club providing a youth service for two hours a week in a church. I have one of those on my doorstep on Saturday nights, and it is a godsend; it is really important for what we offer as a sector. At the same time, you might have clubs that are open for five, six or seven nights a week, wrapping around counselling, employability, sport and outdoor learning. They do really sophisticated jobs. That is what we try to represent. The scale is massive and covers a massive spectrum.

From our paper, you can see that we are closely connected with grassroots community and voluntary organisations across the North. Our network represents around 600 groups. From somebody who has been doing this for a long time, I can say that that is at the top end of 90% or more. We really do touch a lot of local groups and provide support. Of those, 280 are registered with the Education Authority for youth services. That is probably one of the unique things that sets us apart in what we think our role could be. Of those 280 groups, 96 deliver on EA local funding. Be very clear that that is pretty much 100%. When anybody receives funding from the Education Authority for local youth services, we are the ones who get the phone calls about the pressures that they are under and the difficulties that they face.

We feel that we have an important role to inform you effectively about the current situation. We are here today to ask for help. We are asking you clearly to help us with one of the most significant transformations of local youth services and to help us lead and be in the vanguard for change. We are really appealing to you to help us, because we feel that we have got to the point where we have done everything that we can. We are being clear to you today.

We have been through such a process to write the paper that you hold today. We have engaged as far and wide across our membership as we can, including with our boards and all sorts of things. I am fed up writing and rewriting it. We will keep on doing it, but we have done a lot on it. We shared it with our colleagues in the uniform sector, who gave us feedback. Colleagues in the Irish-medium sector gave us feedback, and colleagues who have a really strong rural network gave us feedback from young farmers. We shared it with everybody and took feedback. We shared it with the EA programme board, which is responsible for the Youth Service funding review. I will name those people. They are Karen McCullough, the DE policy lead, who was here a few weeks ago; Celine McStravick, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), in her role on the programme board; and Simon Christie, the director of finance in the EA at the time. We pay tribute to them all, because they made the paper better and helped us. We met two other groups of people: the EA's director of children and young people's services, Dale Hanna, and we shared the paper with him and his team; and, at the request of the Minister, departmental officials, whose feedback we took as well.

We have done a lot. We have got to a strong place. We feel that our asks are definitely part of the solution. We are here to talk about two things. The first is to appeal strongly to the Minister to establish a local youth work sector planning and investment forum. That would be a game changer, because it would equalise the power relationships that we are under and would help to start a conversation about how we plan and invest. John and Michial will be the go-to people for your questions about our first ask, and I will try to coordinate that, depending on the question.

Our second ask is that you ask the Education Authority to reduce the bureaucracy that is in its financial verification process for local groups. Sheila and Tony will take questions on that. That is how we will try to bat them back. I will hand back to you, Chair. I think that my introduction was under 10 minutes, so I am happy about that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It was. It was seven minutes.

**Mr Dallas:** Perfect.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is spot on. Thank you for that, Stephen. I reiterate that it is great to have you here. It has taken a wee while to get the meeting over the line, given the Committee's various competing commitments, but it is great to have you here.

As a Committee, we are really conscious that, when we are in constrained financial times, which we undoubtedly are, we need to hear from groups that have a stake in the education sector about the challenges that that presents to them. Sometimes, however, if you hear about only the challenges, it can leave you with nowhere to go, because you are just letting the Department or the EA know things that they are already aware of. When groups come together with a collaborative approach and bring solutions to the table, that is the bit that is really helpful and positive, especially in our current context, so this session is really welcome and timely.

You have been really clear about, and your paper really clearly sets out, your asks. You highlighted the two that you are most focused on: the planning and investment forum; and the reduction in bureaucracy. I will kick things off directly. What has the engagement on your two asks with the EA and the Department been like? In effect, what was their response when you presented those asks to them?

**Mr Dallas:** It would be good if John and Michial could give feedback on that. We will try to do it like that.

**Mr Lynch:** As Stephen mentioned, the need to have the planning and investment forum arises, first and foremost, from the fact that the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 does not give the EA the power to deliver through the voluntary and community sector. Equally, the Priorities for Youth policy does not give and has not given the EA the direction to prioritise the voluntary sector as the preferred method of delivery. There is a certain element of protection in that. The current structure allows the EA

to work from the perspective that it protects its assets first when deciding how to go forward, and the voluntary sector then gets the allocation that comes out the other side of that. It is about trying to come to the matter and say, "We acknowledge and understand that". We are not saying that we want the Education Authority to disappear. We are saying clearly that it has role, but, since 2016, when we lost the Youth Council for Northern Ireland and YouthNet, there has been no structure or a planning investment board. That then allows the EA to make decisions unilaterally based on its budget allocation in order to protect its services. We are saying that we are still getting that kickback about that and resistance to it. It is still there.

The legal context talks about the EA having "due regard" when planning its services, but that is all that it talks about. It does not talk about empowering the voluntary sector or making it the preferred method of delivery for projects. We have to get into an arena where we can have that conversation and a platform to create it so that we can move forward.

**Mr Dudley:** We are looking at having ring-fenced investment in the voluntary sector. That is important, because we have to create a sector that is attractive for people to get involved in and to stay in. At the minute, you have community assets. That is exactly what they are: community assets. The John Paul II Youth Club in Ardoyne has been there for 50 years. Ledley Hall Boys and Girls Club in east Belfast has been there for 80 years. Those clubs have supported their communities through thick and thin, but they have been squeezed for the past 10 years. Their budgets are becoming smaller. The requirements are becoming greater, and, to be honest, we are haemorrhaging workers left and right. We are haemorrhaging volunteers, because it is not an attractive area to get involved in.

Ring-fencing a percentage of the Department of Education's budget would be not only a commitment from the Department that shows that it values their service but would give those people peace of mind so that they can strategically plan, look ahead and build their internal infrastructure rather than constantly firefight. A lot of those organisations have to firefight every day just to keep their doors open. At the heart of it, children, young people and volunteers are the ones who lose out. The investment and planning forum will be a way for us to represent their interests, liaise with the Department and disseminate information to those people. We will be able to say, "Folks, here is what will happen. What do you think needs to happen? What are your priorities, and how can we best represent them?".

You talked about our engagement with the Education Authority. For any engagement that we have, we have to reach out to it to request that it comes out to meet us, because there is no appropriate forum for it to do so. The likes of the regional advisory group (RAG) is there to discuss themes in the local development plan (LDP) and the regional development plan (RDP). Department of Education subgroups inform the next policy cycle, but that could be in four years' time. In the immediate term, this is an alternative that can be established, and we already have an idea of how it would look.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is all really helpful. It was probably unfair of me to ask you what the EA's views are on your proposal. Ultimately, the Committee can seek those from the EA, and that is likely to be an action arising from this meeting. From my perspective, having heard you speak about the matter, I see that your proposal is not a million miles away from some of the recommendations in the independent review on area planning for schools, which includes the need for strategic oversight of how we reorganise our school estate to make sure that it meets local communities' needs. Ultimately, this is what it is about. It is not about protecting one organisation over another but about making sure that we make the most of the resources that we have available to us so that we can meet the needs of local communities and of the young people in those communities while doing so on a strategic basis. I can certainly say that the proposal seems to have a lot of merit, and I am interested in it. I hope that members will agree, and I am sure that we will hear from them as we go around about engaging with the EA to really seek its views on what can be done to take the proposal forward.

**Mr Lynch:** There is another wee part to that. We know that budgets are tight. We understand that there are costs that are inescapable to the Education Authority in meeting its needs, but we should start to look at the budgets slightly differently and look at vacancies in the service and consider whether there is a viable option and an alternative in the voluntary sector. We do not talk about vacancies because we are after people's jobs. People are not in them if they are vacant. The harsh reality is that, if we do not fill those jobs, either through statutory provision or through the voluntary sector, it is young people who are losing out. Young people are not getting access to services because there are vacancies. We want to try to get into a conversation about how we, in this planning and investment forum, challenge things. 'Priorities for Youth' talks about challenging the historical

deployment of youth work in the voluntary sector, but it does not talk about doing that in the statutory sector. How do we look at challenging the historical deployment in the statutory sector and asking whether there is a viable option? Is there another way to increase the voluntary sector's capacity to deliver that better meets the needs for children and delivers outcomes? Sometimes the answer might be, "No, there is not", but at least let us have the conversation. Let us have a conversation and a discussion about how we do that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That relates to so many other issues that we have considered. When we talk about special educational needs, there is always the discussion around people feeling like they are just facilitating a system. The system looks like this, so we will tweak it and tinker with it to get the right outcomes, but, sometimes, you need to look at the system and consider whether it is the right model to deliver.

**Mr Dallas:** We are really excited about what DE has emerging from its policy forum. It is good. The atmosphere and the connection are strong. We are all going, "This is great. What did we do right here that is making this emerge? This is just great". However, as Michial said, the previous policy took eight years. We need something now. That is crystal clear. On Michial's point, we email. Of course, there is a courtesy, and you have your meetings, but we do not do what John described. Let us have a discussion about the vacancies. Has a voluntary sector group emerged in the past 20 or 30 years? When the Education Order was written in 1986, people were not thinking that the voluntary sector could grow, but it has. With a lot of things that EA faces at the minute, it is hard to say that we are going to not fill a post, because that was normally what was done for 30 years. This is very much about a status quo conversation and the system and the architecture. I feel that DE will move to a new place, but I do not think that we can wait three or four years. It is too fragile to wait that long.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is all really positive. I want to bring other members in. I have a final question, which is on the slightly longer-term bit to do with the strategy. With the overarching strategy for youth work, do you feel that there is enough clarity on where the balance sits between statutory and non-statutory and how that is prioritised? It feels that what is written down does not match the reality on the ground, where the statutory sector is filling the gaps that the voluntary sector is not providing. Is policy development an area that you would like to see clarity in? I ask you to answer briefly, because I want to bring members in.

**Mr Lynch:** It certainly is. Stephen alluded to this at the start: how do we create that balance of equality where the sector is recognised for what it does and what it contributes, and how much can we make the budget work a wee bit further to maximise the outcomes for children and young people? One of the synopses that we have is about saying, "Let us dissect the old policy, get into actually thinking about what worked, ask why it worked and what the voluntary sector's role was in that, and then let that information influence the next policy". The current structures lend themselves to the EA working from a protective point of view, where it protects its assets before it moves to empower the voluntary sector to deliver. That is a fault of the structure that has been set up and the policies that are in place.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is really helpful. I will move on. I pay tribute to those services. In my local area, there are some good statutory services. That is clear. I do not think that you are approaching this by pitting one sector against the other; it is just that you are saying, "Let us maximise the resources that we have and work together in a collegial way on that". It is all very positive. I will pass to Danny, because I know that the Deputy Chair has said that Danny will cover questions from that side. I will then bring in any other member who indicates.

**Mr Baker:** Thank you for coming in today. I know that it has not been easy for you all to come together to do this paper. Given how funding comes about, you are always pitted against each other, so this is great and is a massive step in the right direction. To start us off, will you tell us what the key experiences are and the developments that have got us to this juncture today?

**Mr Dudley:** Where our consultation with the sector is concerned, the sector has been so fragmented in the past 10 or 15 years. We have been pitched against each other inadvertently. I do not think that that was people's intention, but that is what has happened. It is difficult to work together when that wee bit of hostility is there. We have put that aside now, because a lot of things have changed in the sector. We have had discussions in the past 12 months, and we have got through a lot of the historical issues that we had. We are looking to move into a place where we can work together and can all coexist and flourish. At the end of the day, we all have specialisms, and we can put them together, create a really good service for children and young people and support communities way better. That was at the fore of our thinking throughout that.

Getting to this position was not easy at all. There were plenty of hard conversations, but we have got here. We have had a lot of discussions with the voluntary sector and our members to get here, which is important, because it is not just us saying, "This is what we think needs to happen". This came from the ground up, and the members and local organisations, because they are so vulnerable at the minute, were saying to us, "You need to come together. Anything that has happened in the past is done. Put it all aside". The local organisations were also pushing this, so everything that you have in front of you is derived from local provision.

We had a consultation in Dunsilly last month with, I think, 50 members who showed up, and we were asking, "What do you think about the paper? Are there any recommendations on the paper? How can we maybe change the terminology to make it better?". One young person, who was there as a representative from an organisation in Derry, said that they are in the final year of their youth work degree, and they have had real concerns about where they want to go in a career, because they are looking at the voluntary sector and saying, "Do I really want to go into this? It is just stress and anxiety, so do I really need that?". At the end of it, they turned round and said, "It is actually really good, because I now feel that I have a lot more confidence in where we are going as a sector". That was really reassuring for us, because it came from the people who we are trying to support.

On the point about the Education Authority, we are not looking to displace it in any shape or form. We are not looking to step on its toes in any way. All that we are looking to do is put a structure in place that allows us to work collaboratively, and the investment planning forum would be the best way to do that in the immediacy.

**Mr Lynch:** I will add to that, Michial. One of the key things that gelled us together was getting rid of all our baggage, our egos and what our organisation has done in the past and going in and then having those hard conversations. This is about children and young people and about giving them the best service that they need in the areas in which they need it, whether that be through street-based youth work, Irish-medium youth work or SEN. Whatever it may be, there is a wealth of experience on this panel, and the reality is that, if we continue to be separate, we are not supporting our members and are not doing what we need to do for the sector. We had to put the personal stuff to one side, sit down and say, "How do we drive forward?". We found that common ground in young people, and then the mission to protect front-line youth work was the key goal for us.

**Mr Dallas:** What you have right now will not last forever. This is hard. We need to deliver, because local groups will say, "It did not work. We need something else". You have a window here; we feel that we have a really good window. I just wanted to say that.

**Mr Baker:** What types of youth work vacancies in the EA are we talking about? What grade levels? What did you mean by that?

**Mr Lynch:** When we talk about vacancies, Danny, we are talking about, obviously, the posts that are not filled. There are a lot of complexities and a lot of jobs in the service. We are really talking about ones that are not attached to centres at the moment and that are not attached to part-time staff. You are really looking at the area worker posts that are out there and that exist across the region and are not filled and at whether there is a voluntary sector provider beside them that could actually look at that. We need the planning and investment forum to get into the nuts and bolts of why a centre cannot be passed across to the voluntary sector, whether there is the capacity to look at leadership and management off-site and to look at joint delivery if there is an option to increase the provision for children and young people. Primarily, we are trying to focus on posts that have no one in them and that are not attached to a centre, because that becomes more complex for the EA, which has to look at who looks after that centre, how it will work that out and how it will look after the part-time staff who are sitting there. When there are vacant jobs that have none of that attached to them, that becomes the option.

**Mr Silcock:** It is important to say that we are not looking to take existing EA jobs out of the EA — that is really important for us — but there are existing vacancies that we feel that the community and voluntary sector is skilled and equipped to fill in the morning. We are asking just to be in the conversation about where the vacancies are and how we can help to fill them. That is our ask.

**Mr Lynch:** We ask you, the Committee, to ask the Education Authority where those vacancies are, and then, through the planning and investment forum, we could start to look at them. It could be that the answer is no, as I said before, but the answer could be yes, there is a voluntary sector adviser there that could step into that role, even some roles where there is an acting-up position. I can speak

from my area in Derry. At the minute, there is an area that has seven or eight voluntary sector providers and one statutory provider, but the EA has just gone out and put a senior worker in that area. You ask "How does that weigh up? There are seven or eight voluntary sector providers, so why does it need a senior worker to oversee the service in that area?". There is no need. It just does not weigh up, so we need to have a conversation about that and how it is used.

**Mr Baker:** Has the EA corresponded with you on that?

**Mr Lynch:** It came back with some sort of response — you can correct me if I am wrong here, folks — saying that it has to look after its own workers and there are regulations on that. We understand that, but we are trying to articulate that this is not about a worker. It is about a vacant post, so there is no worker in that post. We are looking at changing that. Just because it has always been a statutory deployment does not mean that it has to stay a statutory deployment in that arena. Then there is due regard to consider; the EA has to pay due regard only to the partners in the area. We have to make sure that the planning and investment forum brings those discussions to the table so that the EA cannot just say that the legislation requires it only to do that through due regard. There is actually an open dialogue around needs, the service that is required to meet the needs of the young people in that area, and who is best placed to deliver it.

**Mr Baker:** Just to follow on from the Chair's question about decreasing bureaucracy, which is the second key ask. Will you elaborate on that?

**Ms Morris:** Yes. I will speak to that ask. We are appealing for a reduction in the bureaucracy of the EA financial vouching process for Youth Service funding. We acknowledge that the EA has taken some steps to improve the financial vouching process. However, the system can be simplified much further to allow for a reduction in paperwork and in the stress that it is causing those local youth organisations, some of which are part time and voluntary. It would also allow for enhanced flexibility.

One thing that is really important for us is improving efficiency and increasing the resources that are available to support children and young people. We ask that the EA considers a model that the Department for the Economy uses for the European Social Fund (ESF) funding scheme and that is similar to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) programme. Through that alternative approach, the EA would allocate a set percentage on top of staff costs as a management fee. That management fee or specific percentage would be unvouched. Currently, 100% of an award that is given to a local youth organisation is vouched — every penny is vouched. The percentage fee, which is unvouched, is considered to cover all expenses, such as programme and overhead costs. We received some feedback from the Education Authority on that. It said that it is a European model of funding, and we accept that. It also exemplifies best practice, however. That European model should be explored further, and it could be explored if a planning and investment forum were to be set up for us to have those conversations.

I will share an example to demonstrate some of the challenges that local organisations face when it comes to the 100% financial vouching process. This year, two YouthAction member organisations, one of which is in the southern area and one of which is in the Armagh area, each had to return £9,000 of its award for disallowed expenditure after the vouching process was completed. That equated to almost 15% of both organisations' entire budget. That money could have been allocated and spent on programme costs and overheads. At the minute, those organisations and parents, children and young people are out fundraising to repay that money to the Education Authority. Part of our ask is this: when that money is repaid, where does it go? Is it retained in the statutory sector, or does it go back to that local voluntary group the following year? How is it spent?

When we met the Department of Education, we asked what the expenditure was and why it was disallowed. Sometimes, following the processes or systems can be quite difficult, especially if the organisation is dealing with a new spec and is not familiar with the Education Authority's systems and processes. Some costs are allocated to the upkeep of a building. Those can be for pest control, as is the case for Kingdom Youth Club in Kilkeel, which is in a rural area; the maintenance of fire extinguishers; the replacement of windows that were broken as a result of usual youth work activity; or the maintenance of lifts. Organisations have put in funding bids for such costs, and those have perhaps been disallowed because they did not meet the terms of reference of the financial vouching system.

That new approach — it is really a best-practice approach that is being used by the ESF and the SEUPB — would allow for a more responsive approach to be taken to the needs of voluntary youth



organisations and allow them more flexibility to allocate resources as and when they see fit. It would also allow local organisations to take a more innovative and responsive approach to supporting their children and young people.

I will use the example of Kingdom Youth Club again. It noticed that there was a drop in the number of service users — young people — attending because of the cost of getting to and from the centre, which is in a rural area, so it wanted to provide transport. It wanted to get a rambler bus to collect the young people and bring them home safely. It was not able to use the budget from that year's award for that, however. It had to look for a different source of funding for it. The new model would allow for a more flexible and innovative approach. To us, it is common sense. The challenge is to maintain the systems and processes of financial vouching.

It would also improve organisational resilience. We are not saying that the money will not be accountable or completely not vouched. We know that our member organisations have financial procurement processes, and all our books are audited many times a year. I know that Tony complains about that. His books are open and accessible, and they are audited four times a year. We support our members to ensure that doing that is maintained. There is a high standard of accountability for spending.

Finally, we believe that that approach would hugely reduce the administrative burden on not just the local voluntary organisations but the Education Authority. Vouching every one of our members that receives an award is time-consuming and uses resources that could be reallocated to the voluntary sector to have a direct impact on children and young people.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I probably need to bring in other members at this stage, but there is plenty to follow up on. In the interests of time, I ask that you try to keep the answers as focused as you can to make sure that we get around everybody.

**Mr Butler:** I knew that Danny would try to hog the questions. He is trying to use up all Sinn Féin's time. *[Laughter.]* He is trying to get his seven minutes multiplied by three, but it does not work like that, Danny. *[Laughter.]* Thank you very much. This has been really good. I am not singling anybody out, but, Stephen, you have been working on this for a while. How you have come together to speak with a single voice is remarkable. I remember conversations with the EA on similar themes at the previous Education Committee. It is remarkable that you guys have held together post COVID and after all the pressures that came with the reduction in funding as a result of Brexit.

Your paper is brilliant, so I will not go too much into what you are offering. Your ideas are really sound and practical, especially the manner in which you have pitched them. You are not after EA's job. There is a role for EA, and it performs that role well. I am aware of the issues that you face. We have the Resurgam youth initiative in Lisburn and LOGIC cafe in Moira. I have sat down with them to try to negotiate the layers of bureaucracy that you have spoken about, which are blockages to performance.

Would you perhaps be able to do three things for me? One is to paint a picture of the impact on our young people of services being lost or interventions for young people being delayed. Can you also tell me about the impact of that on staff, delivery and operations? Furthermore, can you tell me whether there are any issues with recruitment and retention? I can only imagine it, but, at events at which we talk about the community and voluntary sector in particular, we hear about the real pressures post COVID in attracting and retaining staff. That is an imminent threat, and, if we do not have a much more efficient service, the service could end up on its knees.

**Mr Silcock:** Those are good questions, Robbie and Danny. Before I respond, I will go back to Sheila's point about the ESF and the SEUPB. They were designed in Europe but are being implemented locally, so there is no huge barrier to that model being delivered in Northern Ireland. There is a difference between unvouched and audited. We are all audited. We are audited four times a year, by three Departments and by our auditor. Clearly, we welcome anybody walking through the door and asking, "Where is that receipt? How is that money spent?"

Let me take it back to your constituency, Robbie. We have a job available in east Lisburn. It has been advertised three times in the past three months, but I cannot get anybody to fill it. I do not know whether that is to do with the salary or the perks that come with the job or — the biggest factor — its being only a three-year post. I cannot think beyond that. It is difficult even to motivate people to come into that post. We have other staff for six months or one year or who are sessional workers. It is therefore difficult to create, build and motivate a team around that.

I will go back to what Sheila said about staff and delivery. If we cannot replace a window, we cannot deliver youth work in the hall. We have an obligation from the Education Authority to ensure that we stick to health and safety requirements, but, if we cannot replace a fire extinguisher that an eight-, nine- or 10-year-old wanted to have a bit of craic with and half-emptied, we cannot deliver. Such things do not happen all the time, but they do happen. We are trying to find a way, a system and a process of asking, "How can we change this?". We have come up with a solutions-focused paper that states, "We have ideas about how to fix some of this stuff". "Transformation" is one of the key words. It is about the transformation of local youth services. We recognise the things that have been done well in the past and want to build on them, and we think that we can do things differently and even better.

The impact of £18,000 being taken off local youth services is absolutely massive, as it can affect summer schemes, day trips, sessional workers or whatever. Delivering children's and community youth services will not happen if we do not transform how we vouch and how we do our financial processes.

**Mr Butler:** This will be my last question. I appreciate your answers. Something that is not talked about enough is shared initiatives. I see Lurgan Youth Annexe in particular doing them. What is happening is happening not just in the evenings, as Stephen said. Yes, some clubs will operate on a Saturday or a Sunday, or on one or two evenings. Extended work happens too, however. Do you think that that is captured well enough? What impact does young people from diverse backgrounds getting to spend time together have? Is there more that we can do in that sphere?

**Mr Silcock:** You could release the T:BUC money [*Laughter.*]

**Mr Butler:** I wish that I could.

**Mr Silcock:** I say that as a joke, but it is a jibe as well. "T:BUC" stands for "Together: Building a United Community", and we are bringing in all sections of the community. Our organisation works in inner east Belfast, in Lisburn and in Galliagh and the Waterside in Derry. That work is what helps bring us all together. Releasing that money would help. Withholding it makes things very difficult at the minute.

Like lots of organisations, we have a good relations member of staff who is a Protestant married to a Catholic. I can take you through generations like that. We are therefore crossing the divide. We are bringing people from west Belfast — from Twinbrook, Lagmore and Poleglass — across to Pitt Park, which is a hive of activity at the moment. We are not afraid to do that. All our organisations do the same. I am sure that you guys belong to organisations that are doing the exact same thing. It has an impact, and I do not know how you can put a value on relationships, community building and releasing community tensions.

**Mr Butler:** I know that it happens, and I see it happen, but I do not think that we celebrate it enough. The news will report the bad stuff, when young people are, sadly, sucked into doing something bad, yet how many events happen to stop young people going in that direction? Thank you for that.

**Mr Dudley:** We did a bit of research on that, Robbie, two years ago.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Briefly, please.

**Mr Dudley:** It came out that voluntary sector organisations were under-reporting, because they do not have the time. If you have to sit down and adequately capture every single thing that you are doing, that takes a lot of time. Leaders and youth workers who are in charge are having to occupy two or three roles, or even perhaps four or five. They are having to look after the maintenance of the building, be the youth worker and do the finance. They wear all those different hats, depending on what time of day it is. It is difficult to find the time to do the reporting. Reducing the bureaucracy would allow them more time to capture more about the impact that their work has. It would turn out to be an unexpected benefit.

You also talked about recruitment and retention of staff.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Very briefly. We need to finish on this one, Michial. Finish your point. That is fine, just do it briefly.

**Mr Butler:** Do what Tony did. When the next member asks a question, just answer my question first. That is just another wee tip for you. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Dallas:** This is a great Committee. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Dudley:** That is our biggest challenge. I can speak for my own organisation as well as from a regional perspective. We can offer only fixed-term contracts a lot of the time. Contracts are for one year at a time. That person is then living year by year, not knowing whether they can take on the financial commitment of a mortgage. They cannot get a mortgage. If you are a young person, who is thinking, "Where do I want to go? I want to have a family. I have aspirations to do this and that", you cannot plan more than a year ahead. You are not eligible for any of the milestones that people try to achieve in life. It therefore becomes a massive challenge, and following a passion becomes even more difficult.

Even the likes of salary increments do not happen in the voluntary sector. Pay is frozen for perhaps four or five years. If inflation were to go up by 16%, you would just have to live with that.

We said at the start about ring-fencing investment for the voluntary sector. Imagine that we received an annual increment. Off the top of my head, say that 25% of the Department of Education's budget for youth work went to that but that, every year, there was a proposal of 1.5% or 2% as an increment, at least organisations could say, "Next year, we can allow for a change in salary". That comes from best practice from the SEUPB, which asks you to factor that in. Yes, there are huge changes being made, but there are solutions to them. We are being proactive. A planning and investment forum would be able to tackle those changes on a strategic level.

**Mr Silcock:** Chairman, we have some requests for the Committee.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I understand. You have follow-up asks. I just want to bring in other members first. I will give you the chance at the end of the session to make sure that we know those asks. We need to make sure that we keep answers short and focused or else we are not going to have time to get around everybody. I think that everyone wants to come in.

**Ms Nicholl:** Thank you. This is fascinating. You have such good energy. I love how you have come here with solutions. I am interested in what your asks are.

I will pick up on three points. What about your consortium has worked well, and what support have you had? What are the strategic aims, and how would you bring them to a planning and investment forum? What sort of cross-departmental work is happening? I was going to ask about the workforce, but you have touched on recruitment and retention. Those are all good points for us when we are dealing with economy.

**Mr Dallas:** I will cover what has worked well. John, do you want to talk about cross-departmental work?

**Mr Lynch:** Yes.

**Mr Dallas:** The 600 groups in our network have knowledge that is not being tapped into strategically. John said that, where there is a vacancy, there is an opportunity for change. You need to know whom to ask, however. Sometimes, it is a knowledge set. You cannot overestimate the number of phone calls that we get from local members saying, "This is an issue". The number is massive. That knowledge does not have a place strategically, so people cannot say, "We know a group that's in Castlewellan that can do x, y and z", or, "We know a group in Limavady that can do x, y or z". We are that knowledge source. What is really important is that it is still competitive, because there may be two or three local groups in those places. That is life. We are going to have to accept that. As John said, however, at least there is a chance of change when there is a vacancy.

John, do you want to talk about cross-departmental work?

**Mr Lynch:** There are a number of roles. Youth Service works with probably every Department, although, when it comes to the voluntary and community sector in particular, we do not get acknowledgement. Primarily, we are talking about the Department of Justice, particularly through its tackling paramilitarism programme and through the community safety stuff where we do street-based

youth work. We are also talking about how we work with the Department of Health. Michial has experience of that from the work that he is doing through his health and well-being framework.

We also talk about how we take a public health approach to youth work. We take a peripatetic approach, whereby we meet young people in a place that ensures their safety and stability. We work in a multi-agency, cross-departmental way. The challenge that we face in that regard is that, although we were in certain areas a number of years ago, that being the way in which we should be working seems to have dropped off the Education Authority's radar.

**Ms Nicholl:** I asked a question about the policy move away from detached youth work. The EA said that that is not what it is doing, but everyone who works in youth work says that it is.

**Mr Lynch:** That is because it is not detached youth work, so it is all right.

**Mr Baker:** I wanted to ask about the detail of that.

**Mr Dallas:** It is not a short answer, Nick. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lynch:** It would take a whole day, Nick. We would need a whole day to talk about street-based youth work and what it is. It is all right.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We wrote to the EA on that point, and I think that we are still awaiting the response on that policy question.

**Mr Lynch:** You are right: it says that it funds detached youth work. The fundamental methodology of outreach and detached youth work is to support core youth work. It is what we do. It is a bit like what Sheila talked about when she gave the example. When young people are not coming to our centre, how do we go out and get them? Street-based youth work, however, is completely different. It is an enhanced version of detached youth work, whereby we take a peripatetic approach to safeguarding children and young people. That is what we do in that arena. Doing that requires a multi-agency and multi-departmental response.

The Education Authority has a role to fund it. Last year, it funded 16 job specifications across the region for street-based youth work, 13 of which were filled. This year, it did not do that at all. It said that it allowed the organisation to choose the methodology of delivery, but that completely disregards the role that street-based youth work plays in ensuring the safety and stability of children and young people. We therefore have to arrive at a way of doing it. We are trying to work with the Department and are saying to it that it is every Department's responsibility, because it affects every Department. Tony and I are working on holding a conference to try to bring people together to explore that. People from Dublin and from England are registering and are looking to be part of it. Social unrest exists not only in the context of the North but worldwide. Youth work has a role to play in that regard, but it is about how we use that role.

**Mr Dallas:** That is why we are asking for a local planning and investment forum. That decision should not be made unilaterally but be made collectively.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Do you have anything else to add?

**Ms Nicholl:** No. They are very persuasive. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I do not know how the minutes will record the hilarity that came from Tony's answer about T:BUC money.

**Mr Silcock:** It would be great to put it in the minutes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We will find a way in which to communicate that.

**Mr Silcock:** One thing that I want to say to Kate is that this is unique. We have six organisations that are unified. They have spent the past six months —

**Ms Morris:** It is more like 18 months.

**Mr Silcock:** — picking holes in one another's arguments, saying, "You think this. We think that". We have come to a consensus that we are interested in and passionate about community youth work and young people. That is the position that we come from first.

We have had to set aside a huge amount of difference and a huge amount of opinion. There is a huge amount of, "If you are going to go there, we will not go there", and it is working really well.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Cara wants to come in online.

**Ms Hunter:** Folks, thank you so much. I missed the first part of the session owing to some broadcasting issues, but it has been good to hear some of the giggles along the way.

I have two questions. First, I really enjoyed the conversation about reconciliation and celebrating our young people when they do good, as opposed to highlighting just when they do bad. What more do you think we can do to promote reconciliation through youth work?

Secondly, I am based in the north-west, in the East Derry constituency, but I am mindful of Derry, Strabane and Omagh as well. Are there any particular issues there? I know that a youth club recently opened in Claudy, and there were some challenges with staff recruitment and retention, which has already been mentioned.

Thank you for being here today, and thank you for the work that you do. Our young people are so desperately in need of a place where they can be themselves, and it is through youth work that they can be.

**Mr Silcock:** Your first question is a really good one, Cara. It is a difficult one to answer straight away. Reconciliation crosses a number of generations. It is not just about young people, but youth provision addresses it really well. It provides spaces where young people can be honest and transparent with one another. They can walk in wearing various football, GAA or rugby tops and feel comfortable in that space but also explore the reasons that they are walking in like that.

One thing that I thought of was how can we allow young people to tell their story. Stories about how people grew up, where they came from and their family background are immense in Northern Ireland. Sharing stories in a safe space is absolutely crucial.

We can do that, but we also need to take a strategic approach. That is why we are talking about having a planning and investment forum. How do all the bodies do that together and strategically? How do we hear the voice of young people? How do we bring our communities together in Northern Ireland? There is definitely a way in which to do that.

**Ms Morris:** May I come on that? As much as it is really important to deliver peace and reconciliation work and to bring it to the lives of young people, it is also really important that volunteers and staff access peacebuilding training, learn how to negotiate and learn how to deliver programmes on that type of topic. Moreover, they have to look at their own historical issues. We have all been affected by the Troubles and by living in Northern Ireland, so it is really important that we look at not just the young people but the organisation as a whole and its policies for providing an inclusive and welcoming environment. The capacity of staff and volunteers to get involved in delivering community relations, equality and diversity (CRED) work or peace and reconciliation work is really important.

**Mr Lynch:** To finish, Cara, and this goes back to your point, Kate, about the cross-departmental stuff, there is a very clear role to be played. Every Department has a strategy and key points on which they must contribute to good relations and community relations. How do we get them all working together? How do we connect all the strategies so that we do not duplicate what we are trying to do and so that we are not asking schools to do something that youth services do or asking youth services to do something that other agencies do. How do we take a whole-community approach to addressing the issue of reconciliation in the context of the North?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Cara had a question specifically on the north-west and her constituency. Do you need her to repeat the question? The answer will need to be brief.

**Ms Hunter:** No worries. Thank you so much. That was a really detailed answer. I went to a Catholic primary school and a Catholic secondary school, and I used to attend Portrush Youth Club. I got the chance to mingle and be friends with everybody from all backgrounds and beliefs. The staff there

came from a mix of backgrounds as well. It was a really good opportunity, as a young person, to shape and mould understandings of different upbringings. I went back recently to that youth club and it has lots of newcomer children, including from Ukraine and Afghanistan, so it has been really interesting to see the work that youth provision does in that respect.

To nail down my final question, I am the only representative from the north-west on the Education Committee and I am curious about whether you feel the north-west needs more investment. I recognise that it can be difficult to secure staff, particularly in rural areas. A few months ago, I went to the new Claudy Youth Club and noted that it had challenges with staffing. Is that something that you are seeing in youth provision, particularly in rural areas? Is it more challenging to get staff out to those places?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** If just one member of the panel could respond.

**Mr Lynch:** I am from the north-west, so I will do it. No pressure now.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I assumed you would.

**Mr Lynch:** Cara, you are 100% right. It is a multi-layered issue. There are complexities with the investment in rural areas. I met the rural planning board prior to the release of the funding, and there were a lot of misconceptions on what was being invested in rural areas. We looked at that and said, "There is actually massive underinvestment in the rural areas". However, there is also a heavy reliance on the statutory sector to deliver in those areas. Those are the areas, particularly in the north-west, where we are seeing a lot of the vacancies. The jobs are unfilled in those areas and there is a lot of moving around within them.

The north-west, as a whole, has historically been underfunded. We were making strides towards changing that, but that seemed to stop. The thinking seemed to be, "Well, there is too much of an allocation now coming into that particular area and we need to look at that". I would argue that there is a lot of resource there; it is just not used in the right way. If it were used through the planning and investment forum, we could make more strategic decisions on how we deploy youth work money to reach every child or young person right across that area.

**Ms Hunter:** That is brilliant. Thank you so much. It is very detailed, and I think that we can take that issue a little further as a Committee, so thank you for your answers.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Cara. I will bring Cheryl in and I then want to give you all the opportunity to clarify your asks at the end. Tony, I did not mean to cut you off earlier; it is just to make sure that we know exactly how you are asking us to follow up.

**Ms Cheryl Brownlee:** Thank you for everything so far. It is great to see everybody working collaboratively. I am seeing so much collaborative work locally, basically because they have had to do it; it is so positive to see.

As a collective, have you mapped out the provision across Northern Ireland and are you seeing worrying gaps, where there is not the youth provision that there should be, or are there particular areas where you are finding a significant barrier to youth provision?

**Mr Dallas:** I will answer the first part. We have mapped it, but the problem is that there is nowhere to go with that information; we have nowhere to bring it. We do not have a forum where we can have the conversation. That is the only thing that I want to say. That is a quick answer, Nick, so there you go.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That makes your case.

**Mr Lynch:** Also, it is often not clear where the investment is, how it is being invested in and what the intended outcome is. It is about trying to work our way through what the actual allocation is in an area, what it is funding and what the expectations are from that. It is about trying to get into the nitty-gritty of that as well and understand how the allocations are made, where they go and how we can best use them slightly differently. However, there is no arena where we can have that open and honest conversation.

**Ms Brownlee:** That is the frustrating bit.

**Mr Lynch:** That is the frustrating bit.

**Ms Morris:** Also, it is about identifying vacancies. By identifying the vacancies, we can identify the gaps in provision for our community and voluntary sector.

**Ms Brownlee:** On your point about gaps in provision, in the Monkstown area of my constituency of East Antrim, two posts have been advertised for three years that cannot be filled. There are people in the voluntary and community sector who are more than able to do those roles, but they are not allowed to apply for them. So change is required there to recognise that policy provision. It is a huge issue.

**Mr Dallas:** I talked to people from the boxing club yesterday, in preparation for coming here today, and they wanted me to make sure that you knew that. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Brownlee:** There you go.

**Mr Dallas:** You did the job for me, so I appreciate that. To be fair to EA, how does it make that change? There is no architecture to make the EA think that way, so it just replaced the post. That is a natural cycle and that is what we need help with.

**Ms Brownlee:** Yes. It is about having that collective voice and knowing the exact direction we all need to go in to make those changes and make sure that we are doing it for the benefit of the young people.

**Ms Morris:** It is also important to ask, if those posts are vacant and have been lying vacant for a while, where the money that should have been allocated to the children and young people in that area has gone. What has happened to that money? Where did it go?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Tracking that money through the system is not always easy.

**Ms Brownlee:** There is a common-sense approach required, because there are vacant positions, there are people not getting the service that they need and there is money sitting there. Why is it not being done?

**Mr Dudley:** There are other organisations out there other than ourselves that could occupy those roles if we could not. The likes of Fóram na nÓg, which is a really great organisation that does really great work, could definitely step into positions if needed. Everyone has to be involved in this planning and investment forum, not just us. It should be representative of the sector.

**Ms Brownlee:** Just very quickly, on the methods of best practice, it is unbelievable what the likes of Monkstown or Mo Shearer at the YMCA in Carrickfergus do. I have seen what they have achieved, and it should be replicated elsewhere. I know I am biased, and I am sure that there are plenty of other examples throughout Northern Ireland, but they do incredible work, and it is really important for that best practice to be shared in that space.

**Mr Dallas:** All we are asking for is the fragility to be taken away. But that is not EA's job; to be honest, responsibility for making that recommendation sits with the Minister and you guys. We are only going to operationalise what you tell us. That is where we are at the minute. We have a big ask here today — the planning and investment forum is a massive ask. We are asking for it to happen quickly: we feel like there is a pace with this, and we are sorry about that, but we cannot wait three or four years for the policy cycle to come to a conclusion. We need something now; we need those forums.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is an important point to finish on. I will hand over to you guys to clarify your asks so that we can take them forward. There has been a wee bit of levity today, but this is a big ask, and it is critical that we get this right for the sector. The Committee is well aware of that, and we understand the significance of what you are proposing today. We are clear on the local youth services planning and investment forum, the reduction in bureaucracy, the mapping of vacancies and a shift to the ESF-style model of funding, where a percentage is put on top of your staff costs. We will certainly take those away. Is there anything else that you want to add, just to make sure that we are communicate and understand properly what you have brought to the table today?

**Mr Dallas:** You could have been on this side of the table. That is pretty much it.

**Mr Silcock:** That is exactly what I have here — did someone give you this piece of paper? *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I have just been taking copious notes, and I read my papers.

**Mr Butler:** We were concerned at the start. He is all right.

**Ms Brownlee:** He has not used the bell yet.

**Mr Dallas:** Just to conclude, we are only charities. That is our job. We are not responsible for the strategic structure and architecture of the youth services, but we know we do not have that yet to be have a place to make change. It is not EA's job to do that — its job is to operationalise what it is told. DE needs a bit of vision but it also needs permission for the direction that it is going in. The Minister and you have a tremendous opportunity. That will not last. Not that we are all going to fall out with each other, but we could change jobs or move. Who knows? This is definitely a window.

**Mr Sheehan:** You are making an equivalence between us and the Minister. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Dallas:** Sorry, sorry. You can help us.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It would be great if we could just make those kinds of decisions, but it does not work that way. Thank you so much for your time. It has been a brilliant presentation; we really appreciate it.