



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, HC 1165

Wednesday 24 May 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 114 - 151

Witnesses

[II](#): Mark Baker, Chief Executive, Controlled Schools' Support Council; Sara Long, Chief Executive, Education Authority; Liam McGuckin, President, National Association of Headteachers (Northern Ireland).

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [\[FPC0019\]](#) - Controlled Schools' Support Council
- [\[FPC0009\]](#) - Education Authority
- [\[FPC0011\]](#) - National Association of Head Teachers (Northern Ireland)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Baker, Sara Long and Liam McGuckin.

Q114 **Chair:** Good morning. We are very grateful to you for joining us. There is no pressure here—we need you to cheer us up. We want to hear a story of light, happiness, confidence and optimism. I am going to ask the same question that I began the first session with. Can you give us a thumbnail sketch of the key points? I have literally stuck a microphone under your nose. What are the few points you want us to absolutely seize upon and take away?

Sara Long: Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to come before you this morning and explain where we are in terms of education in Northern Ireland. In terms of the thumbnail of where we are financially, it would be fair to say that we are very deeply concerned about where we find ourselves in terms of education. This year, the Education Authority, which is the funding authority for all schools, finds itself with a funding gap of somewhere in the region of £200 million. The key elements of that funding gap relate mostly to pressures in our schools and our school deficits that will carry forward into the EA block, and also to pressures relating to rising demand and the services provided to children with special educational needs. As you will know, these are some of our most vulnerable children.

In addition to that, we know that there have been significant reductions in a number of earmarked funds targeted and directed to those children most vulnerable and most in need, which facilitate learning for those children. These include the Engage programme, which was put in place in terms of the pandemic, Healthy Happy Minds, some of our Shared Education work and our Holiday Hunger payments as well. We are very concerned about the financial position, where we find ourselves and the impact that that will have.

In addition, it would be fair to say that over 85% of the costs in relation to education are staff. We employ all the non-teaching staff within maintained and controlled schools and the teaching staff within controlled schools, and we know what our colleagues are facing in other sectors. We do not yet have a pay deal for teachers for 2021-22, never mind a settlement for 2022-23, and we are facing into 2023-24. We know that this year, after a successful resolution of industrial action, we have returned to industrial action.

We also know that our non-teaching trade unions are hoping to ballot members in terms of their pay deal and the pay and grading review for their lowest-paid staff. I believe that that will lead to some serious and significant disruption in our schools as we move forward into the next term.

Chair: You have failed your first test. You have not cheered us up, but there we go.



Mark Baker: Having heard the quite shocking news from our colleagues in health, it is very important to recognise, as the Chair and other Members drew out, that there are synergies between health and education. Things that have not happened in health impact our schools and nurseries. We also know about all the evidence that says that education is a pathway to better health in later life. There are impacts on the economy and the justice system, so the impact is broad. You understand that. Education must be seen as an investment in the future of our children and young people, and in the future of Northern Ireland. It is vital that that happens.

One thing I wanted to pull out was the recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report. The headline says, "It is all okay now. Northern Ireland is the same as England and Wales". That report covers the covid period when there was a functioning Northern Ireland Executive making good decisions and putting £800 per pupil into education. England put in £300. That has now been reversed. In reversing that, Northern Ireland is now again £500 behind compatriots in England. When you then add on top of that the £2.3 billion that the Chancellor announced last November for schools in England, for which Barnett consequentials will not come through to Northern Ireland, that further puts Northern Ireland children and young people £230 back.

This is a significant amount of money. If you compare a child in Northern Ireland with a child in Scotland, we predict that £2,000 extra will be spent this year in Scotland compared to Northern Ireland. Over a child's life, that is £30,000 in education. It is vital that there is parity of investment in our young people. That impacts the services and the decisions that Sara has to make and that a permanent secretary has to make.

Q115 **Chair:** Is parity vital?

Mark Baker: No. What is vital is need.

Q116 **Chair:** You said parity was vital.

Mark Baker: What is vital is parity that addresses the need. English education could potentially manage at a lower level of funding. The difference is that Northern Ireland is a fundamentally different jurisdiction to England: 18% of the population of Northern Ireland are of school age, compared with 15% in England. If it was the same, there would be 2.5 million more children in schools in England.

Regarding the special educational needs that Sara has referred to, one in 20 children in Northern Ireland of school age has a diagnosis of autism; it is one in 57 in the rest of the United Kingdom. The need in Northern Ireland is significantly different. I am stating the obvious, but Northern Ireland is a very different place to the other jurisdictions. We have just celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement for a specific reason.



Liam McGuckin: We represent over 800 school leaders in Northern Ireland out of 1,200. More and more schools have fallen into deficit in the last few years because of stagnation in funding over the last 10. Funding for projects is removed and the morale in the workforce is at an all-time low. We are facing a generation of school leaders who are looking at retirement at the earliest possible opportunity. Where are we going to find their replacements?

The school estate is crumbling, and I can give you personal examples of that. The SEN sector does not have the capacity for the children, as Mark alluded to. We have nursery headteachers who have no release time from school, dealing with complex issues that follow on from health, because children are not being seen by health visitors; they are coming into nursery school and they are having to pick that up and diagnose things. Basically, we are not spending enough on the education of our children in Northern Ireland.

Q117 **Jim Shannon:** I have a very specific question, and it comes off the back of what you referred to, Mark. Over the last period of time, all of us, as MPs in Northern Ireland, have been aware of the Pathway funding. The focus of that is that there is a need for the education system to focus on the SEN groups and the people they help. I visited the eight playgroups in my constituency, and they all told me the same story over and over again. It does not take away from what it is. It mirrors what you have just said there about the need that there is.

Clearly, if the education system is committed, as it should be and probably is, to addressing the issue of those with autism or challenging behavioural issues, we must see that that focus cannot miss out simply because the funding is not there. I understand the education system is committed to making that happen and that there will be a priority for those with special needs, autism, ADHD, behavioural issues, and many of those children I saw the week before last when I visited those playgroups across my constituency of Strangford.

How can we focus, and will there be a focus, on that to ensure that, regarding the Pathway scheme specifically, the funding is held in place? You cannot lose out on those children who need help. You cannot disregard them for a year and then come back later, because that year will be a year lost. The effect upon them as they grow into adults will be very dramatic.

Mark Baker: I will say two things. Sara may have a lot to say about this. Pathway funding does not go through the Education Authority; it goes directly from the Department of Education. There is a very important report that I am sure you are aware of, "A Fair Start". It is vital because it talks about the need for early intervention. Unfortunately, it states the obvious, but it gives evidence around that obvious. You need to invest in children and young people, and diagnosis and support for children and young people in their earliest years. My colleague Liam has already referred to that. It is vital.



Here is the challenge for our system. That report came out a number of years ago. I believe it was three years ago. The funding to deliver on that, which would be transformational funding, is not adequate and has been stop-start funding. It is vital that we invest in that transformation of early intervention. That would cover and support Pathway funding and initiatives such as that.

Sara Long: Jim, you will be aware that the Education Authority embarked a number of years ago on quite an ambitious programme of transformation for our services delivered to children with special educational needs. The whole focus of that was to try to enhance our early intervention and prevention services, to create multidisciplinary teams wrapped around individual children and schools, and to try to move our services as far upstream as we could, certainly into the early years when we can. We continue with that work. It is a piece of work on which we have undertaken an awful lot of co-design, along with our stakeholders, parents and school leaders, in order to build public trust and confidence in that and to try to get this right in what is probably the chance of our generation to do that.

Obviously, the funding for that transformation programme, and also for some of the other early intervention services associated with it, is part of those earmarked funds that have been subject to reduction. We are thankful that they have not been absolutely depleted in the way that some other earmarked funds have had to be. Certainly, we still remain with some funding, but it will absolutely temper our ambition and the speed of our delivery. What you can be assured of is that we remain committed to that reform of those services and the services for children with special educational needs.

Q118 **Jim Shannon:** Also, one of the things that is happening as a result of all the pressures from Pathway is that children who should be getting their statements are not getting them. Statements are being delayed. I am not saying they are being delayed deliberately, but they are being delayed. That means that, as we look towards September for children starting school, they potentially do not know whether they are going to one of the special schools or whether they will be placed with a classroom assistant. Parents are coming to me, as they do regularly, but they are coming to me more so over the last week or two to tell me that their child has not even got their statement yet. They do not even have a time or a school. These are critical things for parents, children and the whole family. It is incredibly upsetting. I know you agree with me, by the way, but I just need to put it on the record.

Liam McGuckin: I am going to look at it from the perspective of somebody leading a school. A few years ago, if I had a child coming in from nursery, they would already have a statement and the need would be met. That early intervention is key, but I was speaking to a colleague at a large Belfast primary school on Monday with 900 pupils, and he has three referrals for the year. My maths cannot work under this pressure,



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but he probably should be getting 25 or something like that. What does he say to parents? "I am sorry. I have to prioritise three". Can you imagine the stress that that creates between the parent and the principal and the teachers?

We are doing our best for every child, but we simply cannot get the children seen. As we and everybody else has said before, every year is vital. If they can be seen early, things can be diagnosed or corrected and they can go on from there.

Q119 Carla Lockhart: Just to follow up on the Pathway funding specifically, there is a huge lobby. People are put on notice now with their jobs for the Pathway funding. Is there any hope that you can give them today in relation to that fund being extended beyond June?

Sara Long: None of us can, because it is funded directly from the Department. What I would say to you is that there has been a range of earmarked funds that have either ceased or been greatly reduced. There is a range of staff, including in youth services, who are on protected notice. Everyone is working their way through that at this point in time, but the cuts to earmarked funds have been significant. You will know that they are the funds that come year on year. Therefore, as one of our colleagues from health alluded to, the ability to recruit and retain staff into them is always challenging. None of us can give a commitment today about that. That is one specific programme. When you look at the totality of all those programmes, it is very stark.

Q120 Carla Lockhart: Do you think it would be useful for this Committee to write in relation to those specific funds, given the impact that they have on kids who really need it in terms of deprivation and areas that are in great need?

Sara Long: There is no doubt that the earmarked funds are targeted at those most vulnerable children. The cumulative effect and impact of that will be very pronounced. Also, the funds are targeted at mental health, wellbeing, underachievement and our most vulnerable children. The fact that they are earmarked but are not part of schools' budgets or the Education Authority's core budget is also something that makes them less sustainable than they ought to be.

Q121 Claire Hanna: Picking up on the issues with some of those programmes, colleagues have mentioned Pathway, Engage, Happy Healthy Minds, Extended Schools and Holiday Hunger. Obviously, we know that nobody is doing this casually, nor are any of you defending or responsible for those programmes, but it just strikes me as unbelievably penny-wise and pound-foolish in terms of the problems that this is storing up for health, education and beyond. Those problems will be picked up at great expense in the medium to long term. We were talking in the last session about stabilising and transforming services. What weighting is given to the fact that a cut now, even just looking at the health budgets, is going to cost a lot more to pick up on?



Mark Baker: I would respectfully suggest that that is potentially a question for the Secretary of State, who has set the budgets at the moment. I am aware that the Department of Education has thought long and hard about this. These are not things done on a whim.

Sara has clearly stated it. What is core and what is statutory is often not what makes the biggest impact. That is where we need transformation. We have an independent review of education underway at the moment. That must report, and we need to clearly get political agreement to move that forward, but when we depend on earmarked funds, monitoring rounds and money that comes in November and needs to be spent by the March, its impact is limited.

There was a conversation about multi-year budgets. Schools need multi-year budgets. Schools plan for three-year budgets. They have three-year school development plans but, again, they are not dependent on what the budget is going to be for the next six months, let alone the next year. I share your concerns, Claire, but the problem here is that the funding is just not enough and is not stable.

Sara Long: Just to add to that, as I said earlier, with 85% of costs being staff-based, there are not the levers to make the scale of reductions that are required to be made with that many staff. We have done a quick analysis that suggests about 6,600 whole-time equivalents would be needed in order to make the scale of reductions that are needed. There is no voluntary exit scheme. We probably would not be able to make that scale of reductions voluntarily anyway.

When you do not have the levers or the ability to do what you need to do around staff costs, initiatives and programmes have to take the first slice, because your ability to deliver the scale and the extent of the reductions that are required is limited in other areas.

Liam McGuckin: My school, like many schools in Northern Ireland, is full; it has 410 children. If it is in deficit, it is in deficit. It will open tomorrow and the day after. Otherwise, the economy will crash and there will be nobody to tax. I should not have to look for earmarked funding for Shared Education or Extended Schools. They are good projects, but the basic money in my budget should be enough to educate the children to give them what they need.

I should not need to be looking in September at what supermarket chain has the cheapest ream of paper so that I can ask parents to buy a ream per child. I should have the basic money, and from that I can do the best to improve the teaching and learning in the school. Put simply, our common funding formula is not fit for purpose. It is too raw and too crude a statistic. We need to really look at that and get the money to the schools.

Q122 **Claire Hanna:** Funding is obviously the acute issue and one that is unresolved at the moment, but I wanted to pick up on two other issues



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that require planning, capacity and transformation. You have addressed some of the statistics about the increasing prevalence of special educational needs. Is there a piece of work going on to understand why there are so many more diagnoses in Northern Ireland?

My second question is about provision of education to asylum-seeking children, which is a fact and a reality. Unfortunately, because of the unplanned nature of arrivals, in many cases education is being done ad hoc. I work very closely with people in the Education Authority who are really stretching themselves and putting themselves out there, but what planning can be done to mainstream those decisions and to accept the fact that, in this big, bad world that we live in, we have responsibilities under international law? Provisions and plans need to be made for those children.

Sara Long: In terms of the rates of special educational needs, at this point in time there is no definitive analysis of that, Claire, and that is something we urgently need. I know there are a lot of thoughts about why. I do not mean to undermine that, but while there are a lot of informed thoughts about why, what we absolutely do not have is the empirical evidence or research that tells us why. For example, last week our health colleagues published the report on autism and how much higher the levels are in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. That is something that we, as a Northern Ireland society, need to attend to in order to understand those rates of special educational needs, because that is the only way in which we will really be able to get targeted early intervention, even pre-birth in some cases.

We are working closely with our colleagues in health. Certainly, our colleagues in health sit on our overarching transformation programme around special educational needs. Until we get behind that fully, they will only be well-informed thoughts. I know that there is sometimes a sense that our rates are higher in Northern Ireland because we over-statement or over-diagnose. We need to dispel that myth and to be really clear about our own population, what their needs are and how we best meet those needs. There is an urgent need for that.

In relation to the asylum-seeking children, you are absolutely right. You have met the teams and know the work that is going on there, and you are absolutely right that they are stretching themselves. We are working closely with others—with the Executive Office and the Home Office—to try to smooth out some of those pathways and remove some of those obstacles. You are right that we need to move out of the here and now into how we best plan the educational requirements for those children and make sure that they are met as soon as they possibly can be without the need for as many school moves as there currently are.

Liam McGuckin: Having been in teaching for 35 years and a school leader for 19, the numbers have increased. You just have to be in the classroom. There is an overlap with help. For children coming in as asylum seekers, I have to pay tribute to many of my colleagues in



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Northern Ireland who have stepped up to the mark and taken children into school. We are a society that has always taken in people in Northern Ireland, which is strange when you see the conflict we have; we have always been very inclusive. The EA and the Department of Education deserve credit for putting schemes in place to get children into schools as quickly as possible.

Mark Baker: I want to say two quick things on asylum seekers. The team in the Education Authority is excellent, but it is not a very large team. Secondly, I was in a school on Monday. Asylum seekers had arrived in the school and the school had been welcoming and supportive in November, but they had left in September. With the way that school funding works, the school receives no money. For that, it is not about money; it is about support. Support requires investment. We really need to look at how this works.

Q123 **Mr Walker:** There is a striking contrast in what you are talking about, particularly in terms of things like Holiday Hunger being cut back. The Government here say it is being protected for the next couple of years. At the HAF Awards in Westminster last week, I saw a south Belfast school celebrating its achievements with the Holiday Hunger investment they are getting. That is concerning.

We just saw the announcement yesterday that the Government are stepping up support for continuing tuition in English schools. You said that Barnett consequentials are not flowing through. Clearly, from the budget, they are not, but how is it mechanistically that there are not Barnett consequentials from the decisions such as putting £2 billion more into education for the schools budget over the next couple of years, and also the up to £5 billion going into early years? Surely those should be delivering Barnett consequentials.

Mark Baker: Robin, your point is completely right—of course they should. The Secretary of State has made the decision that there will not be Barnett consequentials this year. That is because of overspends from last year on the block grant. It is being recouped this year, so Barnett consequentials will not arrive. You know the Barnett formula far better than I do. The money is devolved. It is up to the devolved institutions as to where they spend that money. Of course, you have heard from our health colleagues that there are significant challenges across the board. The money is not coming through and it is not going to come through this year.

Q124 **Mr Walker:** What we saw during the pandemic—perhaps understandably in the circumstances—was that health devoured a lot of the extra available money through that period. You were just saying earlier that there was some extra funding for schools allocated by the Executive.

Mark Baker: I worked for Sara during the pandemic and there was significant funding. There was also significant collaboration between our schools, the Education Authority and the education bodies, the



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Department of Education and the Department of Health. It is vital that you get that. The multidisciplinary teams that were being discussed are vital across education as well.

We are in a situation now where we are going backwards. The total budget has gone backwards by almost £70 million. Also, money that was allocated in November to support pay deals and to deal with energy has not been carried forward, so schools are in a far worse position before you talk about pay and price inflation this year. I cannot stress how unequal it is.

I have a concern that our children and young people are being used as pawns at the moment. I also believe, and I am quite content to say, that we are in a situation where there is not a full acceptance that the children and the young people in Northern Ireland are being underinvested in. That is going to be damaging for the future of Northern Ireland. There is no doubt about that. They are decisions that I would say are being made by the Secretary of State at the moment.

Liam McGuckin: If 94% of my budget is wages of staff, and then you add in the price of gas and electric, it is gone. Fundamentally, as our Northern Ireland Members will know, we have a good education system producing good results. We have attracted a lot of big firms into Northern Ireland because of the quality of the workforce that we can supply. We will not be able to do that over the next 10 years unless we invest in education now, because we cannot sustain it at all at this point.

Q125 **Mr Walker:** I will echo that. I have to say that, during my time as the Northern Ireland Minister, I lost count of the number of times employers said that one of the reasons that they were investing was because of the fantastic education system, particularly regarding mathematical skills, engineering and the achievements in that space. That is absolutely something to be protected and looked after. In your written evidence, you variously described a system in crisis and facing unprecedented challenges. Obviously, funding is part of the answer to that, but, beyond funding, what else will provide a long-term solution to setting it on a better footing?

Mark Baker: As a group of chief executives, we met the education leads of the Northern Ireland political parties. One of the key requests is that we need to have a coherent strategy. We need to agree on what we want from education. We need to agree across the board on our vision for education and we need to review our core policies.

There are two core policies that we have. One is ESaGS—Every School a Good School—which is from nearly two decades ago; it is from 2007. It needs to be reviewed. It conflicts with the Sustainable Schools policy, which also needs to be reviewed. Northern Ireland is a different place in 2023 from what it was in 2007. The Department is looking at that and is starting end-to-end reviews, but transformation comes at a cost. As I heard from my health colleagues, we do not need a short, sharp burst of



funding. That is the last thing we need. What we need is planned investment over a period of time with key milestones for transformation built into that. We would be up for that challenge.

Q126 **Chair:** Would you accept that, if those milestones were met, further funding would fall away?

Mark Baker: Given the concerns that education is underfunded, there are savings and efficiencies that can be made, but what we should not do is undervalue the children and young people of Northern Ireland.

Q127 **Mr Walker:** It sounds like a very sensible proposition. The challenge for Northern Ireland Ministers when they are talking to the Treasury on this is that the Treasury will say, "We did some of that with Fresh Start and it never got fully engaged with or delivered. We did some of that with NDNA and the money that was there, but what is the evidence that, if we do it again, it will deliver that transformation?" That is genuinely a reality of the conversations that take place. What is the answer to that in terms of how we get things moving forward and how we build the milestones that can prove delivery?

Sara Long: That goes back to not just the funding itself, but how the funding is applied. An awful lot of what has gone before has been initiative-based. It has been short-term and initiative-based; it has not been about long-term, sustainable application. It is year on year. It is projects. It is pockets of projects. It is pockets of transformation. The key to that is that we move some of these away from being initiative-based to being recurrently funded. It is about how we do our business and how we apply them on a larger scale. That is really important.

It is also important to say that we have the independent review of education under way—and nearing conclusion, as I understand it. It will be important for us, in terms of what transformation looks like or what it means, to see the outworkings of that independent review as well. Then it will be important that there is the political will to implement those findings from the independent review with regard to transformation.

We are probably in a slightly different place from our colleagues in health, who were referencing Bengoa and seven years ago. I know there have been reviews in the past in education. Again, I would always say that a lot of those are very structural in focus rather than necessarily services or schools-focused. We need to await the outcome of the independent review and then we need to come behind that independent review. Again, as a Northern Ireland society, what is it that we want? What is it that we want for our education system and for our children?

Liam McGuckin: I apologise for repeating myself, but again, it is about funding. If a child leaves my school in P7, they are worth £2,500 per head. They walk across the road to another school and they are £1,500 more valuable. I cannot do the job on that money. You also look at the fact that there has been no pay deal for teachers for the last two years,



and you go back to that previous dispute. There are teachers now in their 30s who have never had the chance to develop their teaching skills.

One thing that is making people of my age think, "Do I want to go on in this job?" is the question of how we get teachers back to developing, looking at what they are doing in the classroom and reviewing. It has now been a decade since we have had that school improvement. Education changes every year; it never sits still. Technology changes, and what children need changes. We need to get back to that.

Q128 Mr Walker: We heard from the last panel about the pressure from medical people being poached from elsewhere and moving elsewhere. Are you seeing that pressure with teachers? In terms of teacher retention, you mentioned CPD and pay, but what else would make a difference?

Liam McGuckin: There are two things with teachers. When I came out of Stranmillis College 35 years ago, you had three choices: teach, sell life insurance or go into the police. That was about it. Now you can walk down the road to Allstate, EY or PwC and get a job because you have skills such as communication or working to a deadline. There are other options.

We are also getting a lot of young teachers being targeted by international schools. They are coming over and targeting the teaching colleges and taking them out to the Far East, where they can earn a very good salary for four or five years and come back. We have a drain on substitute teachers. NISTR has been set up in the last year or two by the EA. It is working quite well now, but we do not have the teachers there to fill the gaps when we have illnesses and needs. In technology, mathematics or physics, it is really difficult for our secondary colleagues to get people because there are so many opportunities in Northern Ireland. We need a lifelong career package for people to attract them to education.

Chair: That is not unique to Northern Ireland, I would suggest.

Sir Robert Goodwill: A lot of the discussion today has been about funding. There is no doubt that the figures clearly show that, historically, Northern Ireland has been less well funded than England and Wales, and a lot less well funded than Scotland. Some more recent figures that we have seen from the IFS suggest that the parity has been made up now. You are shaking your head. There is a lot of confusion about whether some of it was covid money or particular initiatives. May I suggest that we write and try to get clarity on this level of funding? This IFS work does not seem to agree with what we have heard today.

Chair: That is a very sensible suggestion. Thank you.

Q129 Sir Robert Goodwill: With about half of schools facing a deficit and, I suspect, a situation that could deteriorate, what sort of decisions are being made in schools to try to save money? How is that impacting



students?

Liam McGuckin: You are going to impact on the youngest and the most vulnerable first of all. For example, if you have classroom assistants, or TAs, as you call them in England, in P1, P2 and P3, you might look to cut their hours from full day to half day. If a teacher takes withdrawal groups for children with reading and writing difficulties, you end up putting that teacher back in a class to save 0.8 of a salary that might be £40,000. Again, those who need the most help are losing out.

Other than that, there is nothing you can do because getting parents to buy reams of paper or asking for school funds is only buttons, so that is it. You are at a point where there is nothing else you can do. You mentioned covid funding. When I got mine, I bought 10 new interactive whiteboards that the kids need and the teachers make fantastic use of. I would never have had that money again because the budget is so bad, so that is how I used that.

Q130 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** One of the problems that schools have all over the country is surplus places. In Whitby, in my constituency, we have 42% surplus secondary places and we are having to make some tough decisions about closing one of the schools. We have already closed a Catholic primary school in Whitby itself.

Because of the segregated nature of much of education in Northern Ireland, that seems to generate surplus places. Could more be done to try to make some tough decisions in terms of eliminating these surplus places and ensuring that we are not paying for empty places in schools? They do not attract funding per pupil, but it costs money to have classes that are not full. That is something we should look at.

Sara Long: We have just last year launched our most recent area plan, which is our area-based solutions for schools. Certainly, within that area plan we are absolutely trying to address innovative and different solutions to schools coming together. Whether that be joint faith-based schools, integrating schools or shared campuses, there are a range of potential solutions that have been outlined within that area plan. We want to move forward with that and move forward with it probably with more pace than we have been able to do up until this point.

Integral to that is bringing communities with you. You cannot impose those solutions on communities. They have to come from within communities and by communities. That in itself can take time and work, but our experience has shown that it is worth it. We have various models and solutions. We have examples of schools coming together and, unfortunately, yes, of school closures.

I do not believe that we are sitting on our hands in Northern Ireland around our area planning agenda either. It is potentially more complicated at times or potentially slower, but all our research and evidence would show that the community conversations, and taking the time to work with communities and bring them with you, always leads to



a more successful outcome. While it might not be the speediest outcome, it is certainly the more successful outcome.

Mark Baker: I am not going to get into the difference between a separate system and a segregated system. I will acknowledge your right to call it a segregated system. You are right in saying that schools are not funded on their approved enrolment; they are funded on their actual enrolment. There is obviously a marginal cost. It is a misnomer to believe that schools are funded for what they are approved to take. They are not. They are funded for the pupils in the school. You know all of that.

I share some of Sara's positivity, but I also have a concern: we are not moving fast enough. There are challenges. There was a very useful report produced by the UNESCO Centre at Ulster University that looks at isolated pairs of schools, where there is maybe a controlled school and a Catholic-maintained school in the same town or the same village, and neither of them is really sustainable. The best solution to keep education local and high-quality and for community cohesion and the future of the children is to bring those together. That is where Shared Education is vital because it builds the appetite and understanding of the young people coming together, and then solutions can potentially come out of it.

One of the problems with area planning is that it still, at times, happens in small boxes, and we need to come together. I know colleagues in the Department are very keen for that to happen, but even if you did that, the financial savings would be marginal. It will be a couple of million pounds a year, but that is not the reason for doing this. I am not going to repeat myself too much, but the reason for doing it is local and high-quality education, specifically at primary level, that supports community cohesion. Like Sara, I do not mind if it is a controlled integrated school, a grant-maintained integrated school or a jointly managed school. Whatever we call it, it is vital that we look at those schools, but it is not about saving money; it is about improving the quality of education. You know that Northern Ireland is a very rural economy.

Q131 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** It is about having those classroom assistants back in the classes.

Mark Baker: It is not about saving money; it is about delivering education in the way it should be delivered.

Q132 **Chair:** You can do both. Those two are not mutually exclusive.

Mark Baker: No, of course they are not, but in this context the reason for doing something is not solely to save money. We are talking about investing in the future of our children.

Q133 **Chair:** It depends whether you refer to savings as cuts or efficiencies. If they have no impact on the qualitative outputs, surely they should be pursued.

Mark Baker: When you are starting from a point where funding in Northern Ireland per pupil is so low, anything is seen as a cut.



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Q134 **Carla Lockhart:** I will just follow on from that one-liner there. Do you think funding for education across the four nations is equitable? Does the Barnett formula need looking at to address the deficit that we have?

Mark Baker: Shall I give you two quick words? No and yes. It is not equitable and we do need to look at the Barnett formula, but the Northern Ireland Executive will also have some difficult decisions to make.

Q135 **Carla Lockhart:** Can you or Sara expand on what that looks like? What funding is required to transform education so that we can provide for our children in the future?

Sara Long: At this point we are projecting that we need £200 million to stand still this year, and that is not taking into account any potential further growth in special educational needs as we go. That is without a pay settlement as well, which would make it nearer £400 million at this point in time.

Q136 **Carla Lockhart:** Is that just to continue as is?

Sara Long: That is to stand still.

Liam McGuckin: The EA needs the money to supply the support services, because the greatest stress our leaders have is not the money; it is the workload. If I have a problem, I need to be able to lift the phone and get an answer from somebody in human resources or legal. That cannot sit and wait two or three days. They need the money to give that support, and that reduces the stress on our members.

Q137 **Carla Lockhart:** The EA needs the money.

Liam McGuckin: Yes, they need the money so that they have an adequate service to give us.

Q138 **Carla Lockhart:** I would say that the EA absolutely needs to be reformed in terms of how it is funded by the Department, but the EA also needs to be reformed in terms of localised assistance and help. Gone are the days when you could pick up the phone, even as an elected representative. I torture you, Sara, and that should not be the case; it should be that localised people help, but that has gone. That experience has gone, and the whole administrative side of the EA needs a root-and-branch review. I am sorry. It is not me being critical.

Sara Long: We have had two recent independent analyses done showing that, for a large-scale public sector organisation of our size, we are about 75 finance staff short and 125 HR staff short. To Liam's point, of course it has gone because the staff have gone. We are trying to run and grow the organisation while trying to deliver services. Absolutely, I do not take it as a criticism; I agree with you. There is nothing I would like more than our services to be more responsive.



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There are certainly things we can do ourselves, and I acknowledge that too. Certainly, that is part of what we are looking at in relation to the outcomes of the landscape review of the EA and some of those recommendations around our communications and responsiveness and what we need to do. I absolutely take that on board and believe that we need to be as efficient as we can be.

We are a public sector organisation. I am the accounting officer. That is our obligation, and it is my responsibility to make sure that we are, but in doing that we have to acknowledge the reductions over the course of the 10 years of the formation of the EA and the Education and Library Boards, the significant staff losses and where we find ourselves today. It is probably a combination of both rather than either/or.

Q139 **Carla Lockhart:** It is huge and unwieldy.

Liam McGuckin: You are correct.

Q140 **Carla Lockhart:** I have one more question around new builds. It is a huge issue. There are a number of new builds in my constituency, such as Portadown College and Killicomaine Junior High School. You will know them all. Also, we have the very disappointing decision around the relocating of the Craigavon Senior High School campus, which we are obviously continuing to oppose. However, can you give us any glimmer of hope? We have always been told that capital is not as difficult as recurring. I am keen to understand where we are at. Are we likely to see some of those projects moving forward?

Sara Long: No, not at this stage. Capital this year is as significantly challenged as Resource, so this year we will struggle to meet our statutory and remedial works, our health and safety works and our minor work schemes, Carla. We will not be looking at major projects at this time.

Q141 **Mary Kelly Foy:** I wanted to ask a little bit more about special educational needs. We have those stark figures that special educational needs have risen by 60%. Those figures showing the differences in autism in Ireland and England are really interesting. We also know that the provision for these children is the single largest demand on the block grant. In terms of these children—the most vulnerable children with special educational needs—what needs to happen to ensure that they continue to receive the support that they need?

Sara Long: That speaks to our transformation programme on special educational needs. Certainly, our focus there was around moving services upstream, focusing on early intervention and prevention and allowing schools, parents and children the ability to access services more easily and rapidly so that those services can be delivered in a timely manner to the children who need them the most.

Certainly, the Education Authority has prioritised children with special educational needs, as has our Department and as did the Executive when



the Executive was in place. The Secretary of State's budget that we received in November made commentary on the spend on special educational needs and the need to see a downward trajectory. Again, we are dealing with different priorities and we will need to work our way through what the budget implications mean for children with special educational needs but, as it stands, they are not protected at this point. There are certain services linked to special educational needs that will require budget reductions.

Q142 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Hopefully, the recommendations in this review will be listened to and considered carefully.

Finally, we have heard that the school-age population is rising. The number of pupils with special educational needs is rising. Schools are reporting a deficit and the five Northern Ireland teachers' unions are taking industrial action. What needs to happen? What are the urgent priorities now?

Sara Long: The priorities are around schools. Schools' finances and school financial deficits, SEN and pay make up the three biggest elements of what we are suggesting our funding gap is. It comes down to those three key areas.

Liam McGuckin: We would obviously say lack of funding. We would say more training for staff and an adequate pay deal for all members.

Mark Baker: Can I add one other thing? We need a root-and-branch transformation programme that goes towards a clear strategy for education on all those issues.

Q143 **Chair:** We heard this from the earlier session as well. How pivotal is it? Everybody is using this word "transformation" and everybody is cognisant that things need to transform to deliver better, and potentially more cost-effective, public services. The civil servants' hands are tied. They can tread water to the status quo, but they cannot be bold and innovative. They cannot necessarily hark back to something that may have been politically agreed in principle a few years ago, because things undoubtedly will have changed.

I am not seeking to put words in your mouth, but the lack of political leadership to face bravely and collectively into those difficult decisions is an enormous impediment, is it not? It is an abdication of responsibility that is now harming not just people who are ill, as we heard from the earlier panel, but those who are within school who need education, support and other services. If you think that is an overblowing of the circumstance, please feel free to say so.

Mark Baker: I would much rather be talking to one of our local politicians.

Q144 **Chair:** You mean rather than to me.

Mark Baker: Well, yes.



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Chair: I will not take it personally, because we should not be doing this.

Carla Lockhart: That is a given.

Chair: Carla says that's a given—right, that's you off the Committee.

Mark Baker: It is incumbent on everybody to ensure that the circumstances are right and that we can have effective Government in Northern Ireland. It is incumbent on everybody and we need to move to that point as swiftly as possible because, like Stephen Farry to my left, we need Ministers and previous Ministers sitting back in their offices, looking after their local constituencies and understanding Northern Ireland education. Northern Ireland is different. Therefore, we are devolved. Therefore, we need devolved Government, but it is incumbent on all to ensure that the circumstances are right to move that forward.

Q145 **Chair:** It is a bit rich, is it not, if members of the unions are having ballots for industrial action when politicians are on strike?

Claire Hanna: Some of them are on strike, not all of them.

Liam McGuckin: Yes, an injection of cash to help the short-term things would be very welcome for pay deals or funding, but we need to really look and get people back around the table at Stormont to make system change for the future. Too many times we just put a sticking plaster on things and then wait for the next thing.

Q146 **Chair:** Just picking up what Mr Walker was saying, do you think the professionals, in terms of the provisions, allocations and commissioning of the public sector within Northern Ireland, are alert enough to what is clearly going to be a very demanding question of Treasury? Things stop and stall. In order to get things back up, you ask me as the Chancellor to write a fairly big cheque in order to move people from A to B. I see no particularly clear and tangible benefits from doing so in terms of outcomes. Why should I do it again?

Sara Long: That goes back to the point that quite a lot of what has happened in the past has been initiative-based. What we need to do is make that into business, if you like. Certainly, public servants are poised and ready for reform, but we all need to get behind it.

Q147 **Mr Walker:** Poring over the independent report on SEN and some of the observations, clearly there is a higher level of need, as evidenced by both statements and the overall level of SEN: it is roughly 50% higher than what we see in the English system. The growth is slower than what we see in the English system. Perhaps that goes to your point about not necessarily over-diagnosing. It is interesting in that respect.

Fundamentally, when it comes to meeting the needs of special needs children, there are legal obligations. I spent a long time talking to the Minister yesterday about one of the challenges we see in the English system, which is people going to tribunal if they feel their children's needs are not being met. One of the challenges we are also seeing is



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children being withdrawn from school and supposedly electively home educating, but they are not really. Also, there are high levels of persistent absence among mainstream children and particularly among children with special needs.

Are you seeing those issues to the same extent in the Northern Ireland system? What is the evidence-based case that can be made for saying that there is a fundamental need for investment in this space? I am struck by what you said about the lack of protection for the high-needs budget, when Ministers over here will talk about the fact that they have doubled the high-needs budget in 10 years.

Liam McGuckin: It is about having a child in the right place. We want to have every child in the right school and the right place. Our special schools are losing room. They are using sensory rooms or medical rooms to take more pupils in. Conversely, sometimes primary school is not the best environment for a kid with high needs, and we need to be careful that we are not, again, putting too much pressure on school leaders to have children in primary school and secondary school who would be better fitted to another setting. That is something our members have been finding in the last couple of years.

Sara Long: Yes, we are absolutely seeing all of that within the Northern Ireland system. There is no doubt about it. Informal exclusions for children with special educational needs and all that you have described are absolutely part of the transformation programme that we have embarked upon around our children with special educational needs. As I say, we are committed to continuing that work. What may change now is the pace of it, but it will continue. There is no doubt that we have significant work to do in the area.

Q148 **Mr Walker:** In terms of people's legal rights and parents' legal rights to have their child's needs met, how is that working in the Northern Ireland system? We have a debate here about trying to remove tribunals from the process. They are currently playing a fairly significant role.

Sara Long: We certainly have high numbers of tribunals. We also have high numbers of tribunals that are then conceded. We have done quite a bit of work on this, trying to understand the reasons why that happens. We are engaging with the Tribunals Service on this to try to find a better pathway than the one that is currently there, because what is happening is that parents are embarking upon a tribunal, there is an awful lot of time, energy and effort, and then we get to a place that is sometimes different and sometimes not. Has all that energy really made the right outcome?

We have a significant piece of work to do there. We have just started trying to understand the reasons for those tribunals and concessions, and whether there is any way they can be circumvented or short-circuited, for want of a better word, so that we can get to the outcome that we need.

Q149 **Mr Walker:** Of course, that imposes costs that you are obliged to meet



on the system. Does that primarily land with the EA?

Sara Long: Yes, absolutely; it lands entirely with the EA. The other bit about that is better access to early intervention and prevention services. Again, it is about the ability to access services and to feel that you are getting the right and appropriate services at the right time and, as Liam says, in the right place for your child, without necessarily the absolute need to progress to stage 3 as it currently is in the process.

Q150 **Stephen Farry:** I just want to ask two questions that are slightly distinct. The first one is to Sara and Liam. We have previously heard reference to the great success of the Northern Ireland education system in terms of outcomes for many people, which is true to a large extent but not entirely. Can I also ask you to reflect on the levels of educational under-attainment in Northern Ireland, both in absolute terms compared to some other jurisdictions but also internally within Northern Ireland between different schools? I am not pointing fingers at anybody in particular, but it is just about recognising the impact of cutbacks, particularly of the additional programmes, on that problem of educational under-attainment.

Secondly, to Mark, with reference to the costs of the vision in terms of education, I appreciate that you, in particular, have pushed back very robustly against the Ulster University report, which is fine. I want to delve into that. I appreciate that you have queried a lot of their figures and the basis for the report, but do you recognise that there is nonetheless a problem in Northern Ireland with multiple systems and a large number of schools, and that there are inefficiencies in the system that need to be addressed?

I appreciate that you have a fear that raising and acknowledging it now perhaps creates a deflection from the wider issue of fixing the problem as things stand with funding. For my part, I do not see this as a one-year solution. This is a long-term rebalancing issue, but it is not the magic wand for anything we are currently looking at.

Sara Long: In terms of the under-attainment, you are absolutely right. As we described, the long tail of under-attainment remains, and the under-attainment remains greatest for those children on free school meals, especially Protestant working-class boys. Regardless of how high up the attainment spectrum we shift, we continue with the tail.

Absolutely, that is what the Fair Start report and the Fair Start programme was designed to try to tackle. The Fair Start report was different from others that went before in that it had a very clear action plan and very clear timescales associated with it, and it was costed to be able to try to deliver it in a tangible way. For example, those programmes and the Education Authority were funded for in terms of Fair Start. The funding for those has been greatly reduced. Engage and Extended Schools were programmes that primarily tackled under-attainment, among other things. I believe that that will have an impact on that tail of under-attainment. I have no doubt about that.



Liam McGuckin: Things like Extended Schools are a great loss because so many children were getting a proper breakfast coming into school. Indeed, as Sara said, the free school meals and the Holiday Hunger payments are vital. Speaking from a primary school perspective, it is very important that we help children aspire. I know a lot of primary schools now look at bringing people in to talk about careers and what you need to go on in careers. Indeed, for secondary and grammar schools, there is much more realisation now that there is more to life than GCSEs and A-levels. There are other pathways. There is also coming out of school and studying and doing a degree at the same time. Our schools are beginning to catch up on that rapidly.

Q151 **Stephen Farry:** That could be lost. We could go backwards if we have cuts.

Mark, what about the vision issue?

Mark Baker: I have a couple of things to say. First, it is not just the Controlled Schools' Support Council that has come out with concerns about the paper; it is also the Department of Education and Ulster University itself. That paper is a starter for 10. I will accept that. It was designed to create debate. I was concerned, and we are concerned, that, at a time when there is a deficit and a challenge of £200 million, people may believe that there is £226 million of waste that is fundamentally not there. I know you accept that.

I am going to give you a "Yes, but" answer. In terms of the "yes", are there ways we can work better together? Are there ways we can do things differently? Of course there are, and it is vital that we do that. Efficiencies are important. I do not accept language like "multiple systems". We have a single funding authority. We have one Department of Education. We have one curriculum.

There are many areas that are common, but there are also areas where things could be done far more collaboratively. We have both already talked about area planning. There are also areas where we could look at bringing communities together through the education system. Again, my concern is that Shared Education is vital. It is really important. Not every community is ready for an integrated school. Not every community is there, so it is really important that Shared Education is there.

I have one final point on that. You may say the cost of division. Some might say it is an investment in diversity or parental preference. It is important that we balance things here, but what is really important is that we have an educated, evidence-based debate about the future. That is transformation. Let us have a vision. We are up for it.

Stephen Farry: I welcome the debate continuing. I agree that it being based on evidence is always a good place to start on that one. We will continue that down the line.

Chair: Can I thank our panel for their attendance this morning? I do not know whether we should all just throw ourselves into the river with



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however many house bricks we can carry. This has been a rather glum set of sessions, but we thank you for your realism.

I close by saying that the appetite for transformational change is a quid pro quo, if one can phrase it in that way. It has been very alive and alert in both of our sessions this morning. That is certainly something we will be communicating back to people higher up the food chain. Thank you very much indeed.