

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland - dealing with the deficit](#), HC 613

Thursday 1 February 2018, Belfast

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 February 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Andrew Murrison (Chair); John Grogan; Lady Hermon; Kate Hoey; Nigel Mills.

Questions 90-217

Witnesses

I: Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, John Armstrong, Managing Director, Construction Employers Federation, Colin Neill, Chief Executive, Hospitality Ulster, and Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive, Retail NI.

II: Gavin Boyd, Chief Executive, Education Authority, Anne Connolly, Chair, Northern Ireland Policing Board, Amanda Stewart, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Policing Board, and Martin Dillon, Chief Executive, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Construction Employers Federation \(20 December 2017\)](#)
- [Construction Employers Federation \(31 January 2018\)](#)
- [Hospitality Ulster and Retail NI](#)
- [Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action](#)
- [Northern Ireland Policing Board](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Seamus McAleavey, John Armstrong, Colin Neill and Glyn Roberts.

Q90 Chair: Gentlemen, good morning. It is great to see you here on a brisk Belfast morning. You will be delighted to hear that the temperature in London is perhaps a couple of degrees higher than it is in Belfast. It is always great to be in Belfast because of the welcome that we get, and today is certainly no exception to that.

As you probably know, the Select Committee is looking into the collapse of the Executive, how that has impacted on business in Northern Ireland and how we can perhaps, going forward at this crucial junction, put in place structures that might make the institutions more robust and make life easier for the people who live in this part of the United Kingdom.

What I would like you to do, first of all, very briefly, is introduce yourselves and the sectors that you represent and then we will crack on with some questions.

Glyn Roberts: Thank you, Chair. Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive, Retail Northern Ireland. We represent about 1,700 members and appreciate the opportunity to present today. It is quite ironic that we have a Westminster Committee here today in an empty Parliament buildings. I was just reflecting that it has been some time since any of us have been up here. This building should be passing legislation. This Assembly should be meeting, passing legislation, standing up for us during the whole Brexit process, addressing the challenges facing our economy post-Brexit, yet it stands empty. One of the most startling things is that we have had no Government for over a year now, and this is part of the UK. We are part of the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world, yet we have no Government in place.

One of the things that I would like perhaps to touch on in our submission is the draft budget paper that was published just before Christmas, which essentially set out options for next year's budget. I fully appreciate the difficulties that civil servants—and I know your Committee heard from the head of the Civil Service just a few days ago—and officials are in, in terms of this current maintenance administration that we have at the minute. One of the most startling things was their proposals to raise revenue, which included increasing business rates by 10%, ending the small business rate relief scheme, hiking car park charges and obviously the other side of this is the cuts that many of our Departments will be forced to make.

A number of us here attended a meeting with the Department of Infrastructure Permanent Secretary this week, where they outlined the nature of the proposed cuts to their Department. That included switching off street lights within two years, no major work to address the state of our roads, nothing to fill the potholes, cutting back on many of the rural



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routes, the Translink that many of our members depend on in relation to getting their customers into the stores. Many of those rural routes will be cut back. If you put this in context, if you look at what the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are doing, they are ploughing ahead. Yet we are in this limbo state somewhere between devolution and direct rule.

The most worrying thing in all of this is that many of our members, who were always champions of devolution, are now starting to ask the question: is this place that we are in today part of the problem rather than part of the solution?

It is beyond disappointing that we have had no Government for well over a year and having, I suppose, touched on the whole Brexit issue, we are facing the biggest economic and social change since the Second World War, yet we have no Ministers in place arguing our case. If you look at the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, they are meeting with Michel Barnier. They are setting out their effective shopping lists that they want to see for both Scotland and Wales. I would say that many of the English regions and even the City of London and the Mayor of London have been doing more to stand up for their respective areas. Yet our voice has not been heard. I think the most telling remark in all of this was made by the Taoiseach last year when he said, "Who speaks for Northern Ireland?" I think that is probably the best place for me to leave my initial remarks, Chair.

Colin Neill: Chair, thank you for the opportunity to come along this morning. Hospitality Ulster, as the name suggests, is an industry body for the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. Our core membership is pub bars, café bars, restaurants and hotels. We would also have major visitor attractions, indeed, the airports, so we have quite a diverse membership. Hospitality Northern Ireland currently sustains over 60,000 jobs, 45,000 of those jobs are in food and beverage, and we contribute over £1 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. We are the backbone of our tourism product and trade stats out this morning show our tourism income has increased by 18%. In fact, we are nearly on target to hit our 2020 target. We are just short of £1 billion income on tourism.

As an employer, independent reports say by 2024 we will have 30,000 job vacancies we need to fill. We need 2,000 chefs now. We have a raft of opportunities; but unfortunately without a Government and action really, we have had no move to reform rates, no move to reform licensing laws, no move to introduce a minimum unit price. We have had no tourism strategy adopted. We have no skills strategy. I could go on, Chair. The only thing we have is a cut to our tourism budget. This year it is at 4%, but it has already seen an equivalent 45% cut in its programme budget. We are going to end up with a tourism arms-length body that actually has no money to do anything, by the time you take the core products and staff.



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When you check our growth rate, we are one of the few industries who—I don't know if there is such a term—are almost Brexit-proof. You cannot put tariffs on tourists. Our opportunities to expand and grow into every part of the economy are huge. Without the Government directing the budget to where the opportunities are—and I have the greatest respect for the civil servants but they will take a very, "Well, everybody suffers some pain other than maybe health and education". Therefore, we are not backing the winning horses. We are just feeding everything and hoping somebody comes along and gets across the finish line. Thank you, Chair.

John Armstrong: John Armstrong. I am the Managing Director of the Construction Employers Federation. We have been around since 1945 to represent the interests of the Northern Ireland construction contracting industry. Interestingly, like Colin, our industry supports about 60,000 jobs in Northern Ireland at the moment and has a total output of about £3 billion.

We submitted a detailed paper to you - our response to the Department of Finance - so I assume you have had a chance to look at that. I would be very interested in fielding your questions on the pipeline of public sector work, skills shortages and the issues we are facing there and perhaps housing, but open to any questions you have. Thank you, Chair.

Seamus McAleavey: I am Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive of NICVA, which is the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. We are the representative body for charities and community organisations in Northern Ireland. We have over 1,000 member organisations. We are broadly reflective of society. We cover people right across the board. A recent social omnibus survey has shown that nine out of 10 people will have contact at some point in the year with a voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland and participate.

Our members are very pro-devolution and would like to see a resolution of the current impasse. They would like to see a return to an Assembly in Northern Ireland. Like others, they do feel that the status that has existed in the last year has left us treading water but getting worse. The feeling is we are going under with a lack of decision-making.

At the start of the crisis, the head of Civil Service, David Sterling, was mentioned but we spoke with him as Permanent Secretary in the Department of Finance and did get agreement for him to extend resource to voluntary organisations that were involved in the delivery of public services as well. That decision was taken obviously in March, which meant that organisations did not really know where they stand right up to that point. It was then given a three month letter of offer, and if you take areas like mental health and children's services in the community it is predominantly delivered by voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland.

We are very appreciative of that, in terms of dealing with the crisis, because the fear was that resources would not flow and that would cause



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absolute chaos in terms of service delivery in our sector. But it creates this really hand-to-mouth feeling that Northern Ireland has at the moment. I spent yesterday with neighbourhood renewal organisations who do not know where they stand with regard to next year. The Department is talking about the possibility of 11% cuts, but it does not know because it does not have its budget agreed and the like.

That is the sort of thing that we are reflecting at the moment. What I think people are looking for is devolution first but, if we don't get that, we need to have a very clear decision-making process in place, so decisions are made and responsibilities are laid out and not something that is ambiguous or haphazard.

Q91 Chair: Thank you very much. That is very clear and unified in your support for a decision-making process that goes beyond the existing highly competent, but necessarily constrained, Civil Service decision-making process that is currently in place by default at the moment.

I am interested in how money is being spent or not being spent. One area where it might not be being spent is, of course, in big infrastructure projects. This is a question for you, Mr Armstrong. Which projects are you concerned about in Northern Island at the moment where money is not being spent because it involves big decisions, the sort that civil servants cannot take but Ministers can?

John Armstrong: I think the context for that, Chair, is that in Northern Ireland the construction industry is heavily dependent on the public sector. The relative balance, just to give you that compared to GB: 55% of the industry here are dependent on the public sector as against 35% in GB, so there is a shift there.

In that context, we are concerned about the capital budget because, when we have clarity over the euro amount that is proposed to be spent in the budget over the next three or four years, with the exception of the major flagship projects—which I assume you are all familiar with—also including the York Street Interchange, there is very little certainty about what monies will be available for the vast majority of smaller works on which so many small companies are dependent here in Northern Ireland. There is a huge concern there.

That is the primary issue that we would have with regard to the big infrastructure projects, that there is clarity and certainty around the major flagships but, other than that, no certainty going forward. I would say—and you have hinted at this—civil servants are in an invidious position because they are not in a position to make the decisions on these programmes.

Q92 Lady Hermon: It is very good of you all to come here this morning. What was very striking, as we went along the team here, Seamus—if I may call you by your first name—you were very clear in what you said that your members were very pro-devolution.



Seamus McAleavey: Yes.

Lady Hermon: I am not querying that. What was interesting was, in fact, I did not hear the other contributors make such a claim. If I could just start from the left and moving towards Seamus. I could sense—and I think we all could—the very clear frustration in your remarks. It is not helpful and it is not acceptable that we have not had a functioning Assembly for over a year here in Northern Ireland. As you said, we are part of the United Kingdom and it would not be tolerated anywhere else. Is it the case that you need decisions made, whether directly by Ministers or by the restoration of Stormont? Can I begin with you, Glyn, are you wedded to the idea of devolution or would you say your members would be just as happy if somebody made decisions and we had good government back here in Northern Ireland?

Glyn Roberts: The first thing to say is that, while devolution wasn't perfect, it is infinitely better than direct rule. It is very clear that the type of direct rule that is mostly likely on offer will essentially be more of current and maintenance and emergency budgets. I don't think we would have the kind of direct rule we had, say for instance, in the 1990s.

I think devolution, by and large, has been good. It did some good things around business rates, in particular. For instance, we had some widespread changes to our planning system that protects our town centres, but is it the case that, should Stormont come back, it will be business as usual? No, I think we need to see Stormont return but operate as a proper coalition Government, not almost like an exercise in conflict resolution. We need to see a change in culture. We need to see a change in the way that they operate but devolution, any day, is preferable to direct rule. There is absolutely no ifs nor buts there.

The frustration that many of our members have is the fact that there are no decisions being made, that we have civil servants that cannot make decisions and civil servants are put in an invidious position.

What I would say, for instance, in relation to the draft budget paper that they produced just before Christmas is I was quite surprised because they have always maintained—and you heard this from the head of the Civil Service a few days ago—that they are making an interpretation based on the last programme of Government, which in itself was not fully complete. Yet the budget paper that was produced just before Christmas is so far removed from the last programme of Government. I was astonished by how far, because the last Finance Minister was about targeting and improving the Small Business Rate Relief scheme not cancelling it, as was proposed in this paper. We were looking at reducing car park charges. This paper says we should not only increase them but extend their remit as well.

Getting into hiking business rates by another 10%, 71% of our members at the last rates revaluation saw their rates bill increase. Rather than hiking business rates we should be reducing them, so that was the major



concern that we have with that budget paper—that it was so far removed from the last programme of Government. The bottom line of the last programme of Government is how we move our economy forward. The proposals outlined in that budget paper would have a serious detrimental effect on the economy. Colin and I have both made clear to the officials in the Department of Finance, if their proposals to raise revenue go ahead there will be businesses closing and there will be jobs lost. I have not even got on to the point that the fact is with Brexit—

Q93 Lady Hermon: Glyn, we will come back to you later. Sorry, I did not mean to cut you off midstride but I need to hear from the other gentlemen as well, because this only the first question. I have several on trade. Colin, please.

Colin Neill: Lady Hermon, yes, absolutely, we are pro a devolved Government. Local people making local decisions, it is easier to connect. With the greatest respect to Westminster, it is much harder to talk to a Westminster Minister, whereas someone here with the power to deliver can understand the local nuances.

There was a line in your question that was key, which was functional. While we have had no Assembly in the last year, I don't think we had a fully functioning one prior to that. It did some good stuff and I would be—

Q94 Lady Hermon: Such as? You are saying there was some good stuff?

Colin Neill: The previous Assembly adopted the small business rate relief. They had started the process of looking at licensing laws. We had a ministerial group look at red tape in a differential way, a number of different things that were there. There weren't the big ticket issues that would make the news headlines, but for our industry we saw engagement and we started to see tourism being taken seriously.

To quote a previous Minister we had some years ago, he said the problem with our industry is we are everybody's friend and nobody's family because every Department owned us and we would start to see that change because, again, local engagement allows us to do that. It needs to be a functioning Government that we know we can make plans with. They can look at what parts of the economy are the ones to back and transition from.

Q95 Lady Hermon: Yes. If I could just interject there. Two things are the fact that your organisation has been campaigning to get rid of air passenger duty for a start off and, also, a reduction in tourism VAT. Those are decisions—I think that you would agree—that would be more based at Westminster. How is it that, in fact, you still prefer a devolved Assembly rather than meeting with Ministers at Westminster?

Colin Neill: Getting a meeting with a Minister at Westminster is quite difficult. There are roles for both, as we have always worked. The Northern Ireland Assembly passed an all-party motion to back the reduction of VAT and this Committee looked into the issue and discovered



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we were disadvantaged. The two work, but for the everyday stuff we need a local devolved administration. The problem is that if we go to some form of government instead of this, it has to be one that makes decisions that replaces it. It cannot be care and maintenance. We cannot survive.

I have used this line before this Committee on previous occasions: Ireland stays pregnant with opportunity but we are in the delivery room. We are on the cusp of huge economic opportunities but if we don't get it right, if we don't line up the legislation, the investment, and indeed it is the infrastructure as well—because tourists need infrastructure to get here; it is also when they arrive if there are holes in the roads and the grass isn't cut, and all those things—it does not create an environment.

John Armstrong: My colleagues have summed it up very well.

Lady Hermon: No, we want to hear from you, John.

John Armstrong: We have some 800 members, and I think they would be almost unanimous in agreeing that devolved Government is the right thing. We want to be talking to Northern Irish politicians. That is important to us.

There is a degree of cynicism creeping in because the longer this hiatus goes on the more people are saying, "We need some sort of solution to this, and if it is direct rule for a period of time then so be it". I think that is dangerous, to be quite honest. Direct rule could answer some of the big issues and take some of the difficult decisions, which again some of the cynics would suggest that local politicians are shying away from. I am talking about things like water charging and prescription charges, and so on. To answer your question clearly, we believe in devolution.

Q96 **Lady Hermon:** You also have a view that you felt that direct rule would be dangerous.

John Armstrong: No, I said some of the cynics. I would suggest that while direct rule might be a way of getting decisions taken, particularly on the big issues, it is not the preference.

Q97 **Lady Hermon:** Seamus, you made it quite clear it is the preference of your members.

Seamus McAleavey: As politicians, you know that the voter can manage various contradictions in their own minds. Our members, as I said, want full devolution. Also, they get fed up with all the problems that arise from a lack of a decision-making process. You are talking about the big infrastructure project. The Northern Ireland Executive took a decision to shift the programme for Government a couple of years ago, and they started to do that. They created a new type of programme for Government and they were taking an outcome-based approach to it. I think recognising that that was the only way that we could solve our problems, in terms of the squeeze in public expenditure and the change



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that needed to take place. A big transformation was proposed in health but right across the board. The idea being that we would try to intervene much earlier in a lot of the issues and problems that we have and stop them becoming much more expensive, as in health.

The problem is that we just got to the stage where—like the eureka moment—here is a new way that we are going to try to do things, and there was agreement between the political parties around it but, since then, nothing has happened. It requires political leadership. It requires decisions to be taken that cannot be taken by civil servants to begin that transformation. The reason I believe strongly that we need devolution is that it is a long-term thing. I think direct rule can patch things up but, in the longer term, we need the devolution solution because we have to deliver change here at least over 10 years. Transformation will not be easy at all but, unless politicians can hold out a vision to the public here, that things will be better in five years or eight years in health, in education, and in infrastructure that we have, unless they can do that then it is very difficult to make the change. It will not be done, as I say, without political direction.

Q98 Lady Hermon: I am going to ask one more question and then we will go on to my colleagues, and I will come back later on because I do have a list. Engagement: we have not had the Assembly, as I said, since January of 2017, so in that interim what has been the interaction with the previous Secretary of State and, indeed, with the recently appointed Secretary of State? As I understand from yesterday that the new Secretary of State has been in post three weeks and three days.

Chair: Three and a half weeks, isn't it, something like that.

Lady Hermon: Yes, over three weeks. We will agree, over three weeks. What has been the engagement with her predecessor? In the last year we have not had an Assembly, would you have had regular meetings with Ministers?

Colin Neill: Lady Hermon, the previous Secretary of State had set up a business advisory group, which we were all in and we met quite regularly.

Q99 Lady Hermon: When was that set up then?

Colin Neill: It has been functioning for about a year. It was very much a listening mode to gauge stuff and—

Q100 Lady Hermon: He was listening?

Colin Neill: He was in listening mode, yes.

Q101 Lady Hermon: What was the outcome of the listening? What were the tangible results of listening?

Colin Neill: To date we have seen very few, to be honest, because obviously the Secretary of State does not have the power to solve the problems. He can take them back and engage with our local politicians, as they are in talks to make the point of why they need to be back in the



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Assembly. Probably most of us here have been active in Westminster this last year, trying to make the case through the other channels because we have less channels. We are all trying. We are all keen to engage.

Q102 Lady Hermon: You will have to identify the other channels when you go over to Westminster. You have conveyed to us that the Secretary of State was a very good listener, but there was not much action as a result of the listening?

Colin Neill: We have also spoken to Northern Ireland officials. Glyn and I met with the Chair of this Committee. We have met indeed with our own MPs. Again, we have held events—I think you were invited along to—on tourism; an event in Westminster. We have held a number of receptions. We have been engaging with all the other political parties that are represented in Northern Ireland as well, trying to form the Back Bench approach. We have pretty much responded to every consultation going that comes out of Westminster making our case.

Glyn Roberts: We have also engaged with the Labour front bench as well, so obviously engaging regularly with the Shadow Secretary of State. I have met the Shadow Chancellor. It is continuing to ensure that that economic voice is heard.

One interesting thing that has happened in the last year is that many of our local authorities have stepped up, and I would not say deliberately trying to fill that void but, if you look at the very strong lobbying for city deals, for Belfast and Derry, where you have seen quite extensive lobbying and engagement with Whitehall in relation to city deals for Belfast and Derry. I think that is a good thing. There is no reason why those city deals could not push ahead in the absence of Stormont. I am reasonably hopeful that we will see serious movement this year in relation to city deals.

I had a very good meeting with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association yesterday. It is advocating a devolution bill to enhance the powers of local authorities, which should have been given to them anyway. Things like power over, for instance, regeneration and the ability to fill the potholes and do minor road maintenance. There are things that we can do with Stormont not there but, at the end of the day, we need a functional Assembly. We cannot have this care and maintenance emergency budget scenario for much longer. My worry about if we have direct rule is that it will not be the full fat direct rule that we have had in the past. It will be more current maintenance. They will probably fill a few public appointments. They will probably address some of the budgetary issues, but I don't see much more than that because I think they are conscious that they don't want to do too much because the whole focus will be to get this place back.

As I said that the start, it is ironic that the only parliamentary committee that has sat in this room is you guys in the last year.



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Q103 **Lady Hermon:** Right. Could I just ask, and then I must pass on, is that analysis sheer guesswork on your part or do you have inside knowledge that the rest of us don't have about the form of direct rule, because that is not something that has been—

Seamus McAleavey: Lady Hermon, may I—

Lady Hermon: Of course, we are delighted to have you here with us.

Seamus McAleavey: I met the Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, quite a number of times during his time. Two issues that we were very much focusing on was the current state of the political impasse on Northern Ireland devolution and obviously the Brexit issue as well. It was pretty clear that the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office's policy was to try to do their absolute best to restore devolution and, therefore, turn their face away from direct rule. I was certainly saying to him—conveying the message from my member organisations—that if there is a point where he believes he is not going to get agreement, that he needs to do something different to facilitate the proper decision-making process.

There were two ends of the continuum. We have devolution or we have direct rule. There may be options in between. It is entirely up to the Secretary of State, but what we were absolutely clear with him about was that we need somebody to make decisions; sometimes decisions that I might not even like but at least we know where we stand and we know the direction and all of that.

The new Secretary of State, obviously she has only been here for a very short while. I have sought meetings and I am sure everybody else has, and I am sure we will get them in due course. We talked to the civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office quite a bit. We are also involved with the other lead bodies in civic society, so the NICVA, the CBI, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Ulster Farmers Union have met jointly with the Secretary of State and have now requested a meeting on Friday. We have a meeting with the current Secretary of State. We are much on the same page on all of these issues.

Q104 **Lady Hermon:** Yes, but you want to have direction. I am sure I speak for all us when we wish James Brokenshire a full recovery from his surgery.

John Armstrong: If I can go back to your question very briefly. We had had a number of meetings with the Secretary of State. He was naturally focused on getting devolved Government back here, so our focus has been talking more to senior civil servants at Permanent Secretary level because what we are interested in is the delivery of infrastructure projects and work for the construction industry.

Lady Hermon: Yes. Thank you.

Q105 **Chair:** I am fascinated, Mr Roberts, by your suggestion that local



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government has stepped up to the plate. Of course, one of the things that defines Northern Ireland is—many things define Northern Ireland—the relatively poor position that local government have within the government firmament. It has been a piece of work for some considerable time to see how that can be addressed. Would you say that perhaps we are grasping for a silver lining from this particular cloud, the impasse we have had with the Executive in the past few months? That it could be this might be the start of a process in which local government in Northern Ireland becomes more significant and, if so, do you feel that that might be—I suspect the answer to this is, yes, it is not a difficult question—of overall benefit to the people that you represent?

Glyn Roberts: We have always had a good, strong working relationship with our local council, particularly obviously when they moved from the 26 model down to 11. They got substantially more powers in terms of economic development and planning, things like car parking. We were always very clear that they needed to have the regeneration powers, which the Assembly withheld. Likewise, I would say that they need to have those regeneration powers. I think that they need to have enhanced powers in relation to things like dealing with minor roads, things like on-street car parking, where they don't currently have that power. I think, whether we have Stormont in place or not, there is a still a very strong argument to enhance the powers of our local councils.

For instance, there are a number of councils that have not been involved in the whole city deal process, have been doing receptions at Westminster, they have been upping their game, but it gets down to this: they don't have the full suite of powers that the Assembly has. They certainly have powers in relation to dealing with a lot of day-to-day issues in relation to the town centres, but the big ticket powers they don't have. We have suggested in the past that they could have greater power over rates, or to vary rates but, ultimately, that would I would suppose require primary legislation in Westminster.

Whether or not the Secretary of State would be willing, if we went to direct rule, to give them enhanced powers, I don't know. That would be obviously a matter for the Secretary of State. We do need a functional Assembly because the councils can only do so much. A lot of them are working very hard. For instance, the likes of Mid and East Antrim have set up a manufacturing taskforce to try to address some of the big manufacturing losses that their local council area has experienced in the last few years but, ultimately, they don't have powers.

Q106 **Chair:** That is accepted, but part of our work in this particular inquiry is to try to sort out how we can make Governments in Northern Ireland more robust going forward, so that we don't end up with the kind of situations we are in at the moment. One of those things may be possibly a recommendation about improving the position of local government within the overall scheme of things. It is one of the things we are struggling with at the moment.



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John Armstrong: Chair, we are very interested in this. We are doing a lot of work with the local authorities at the moment. In fact, we have a presentation next Friday to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, trying to encourage them, as Glyn says, to look at how they can create economic development and, per se, help the construction industry achieve that through rates and using the rates to lever in additional monies. We are very actively involved in that and would support anything you can do on that.

Seamus McAleavey: The former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, led the review of public administration in Northern Ireland. At that time, public expenditure going through local government in Northern Ireland was probably about a 3% total. Peter Hain had a target of trying to shift about 10% to local authorities. I could not stand over what the figure is but I would say it is much less than that.

Our local authorities do not have the powers and the resources to carry out a lot of things that may happen in England, Scotland and Wales. That was a significant piece of work with the RPA. Members will remember it went on for quite some time. It got deadlocked for quite some time as well. It is not easy to make some of these changes but desirable I think.

Colin Neill: Sorry, Chair, just to add, obviously the councils have been stepping up in areas. The problem is they are not mandated with the skills and stuff to do it. The councils are getting a range of more powers. The only caveat we have is Northern Ireland is a very small place with a 1.8 million population. We only have the population of one decent city if we start comparing us in a grouping to GB. Our concern would be that if we let it go piecemeal, we start getting different regulations and different interpretations of regulations in different scenarios. In our industry, if you own four hotels in four different council areas it is a headache. There is a need, obviously, to have a layer above the controls.

Chair: Yes, that is a point well made.

Q107 **Kate Hoey:** Thank you all very much for coming in this morning. I get the feeling from all of you that there is a sense of urgency around. That we have had a year of deadlines and all sorts of things. Are you pleased now that it looks like—whatever happens—there is a deadline for something to change after 8 February when the Secretary of State has said the talks will be ending?

John Armstrong: We do tend to get a little bit sceptical about deadlines.

Kate Hoey: Yes, I get that.

John Armstrong: From a practical perspective—and I am sure colleagues would agree—we absolutely need to see a budget set for the next year by the beginning of February at the latest.

Q108 **Kate Hoey:** Right. I think that is where that deadline would come in. I was very interested in what you said about direct rule, that you did not



think, whatever happened, if there was no Assembly, that we would go back to—I don't think you quite used the word—real direct rule is what it was. Why do you think that and what was different about the last time there was real direct rule, and why could we not have that back?

Glyn Roberts: I think if you put it in this context, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are getting substantively more powers. There are now devolution deals to many of the local authorities in the north of England. We are seeing enhanced powers in relation to some of the enterprises in the rest of the UK, and we would be in the position where we are handing all those powers back. It would be really strange. It is something that I put to the Secretary of State at one of the business advisory meetings. I said, "Do you really want to take responsibility for street lights in the Belmont Road?"

I recall in a previous role when I was working in an advocacy role during the last period of direct rule, when we had much of Northern Ireland legislation passed by Order in Council, and the legislation was very hard to amend. There wasn't the scrutiny and a lot of Northern Ireland legislation issues would have been at 11 o'clock at night to an empty House of Commons Chamber. You never got the detailed scrutiny of Northern Ireland legislation that you did get in Stormont.

What I would say is I do think that we need to have Stormont back but it cannot be business as usual. We need to make big changes to the way Government functions here and they need to operate like a proper coalition Government. As Seamus said, they were doing some good things in relation to the outcome-based programme for Government. That was a big change. We were making good progress in things like reforming business rates. The previous Minister of Finance was doing some great work in rethinking the whole business rates issue. Sadly, all that fell when Stormont fell.

Kate Hoey: Back to Colin.

Colin Neill: You used the word "pleased", I think. Pleased if we get a devolved Government; relieved if we get some sort of Government. There is a difference there. I would appeal today to say we need a proper full functioning Government. Not that we have insider knowledge. It is only a fear—a fear in an effort to keep the door open—if we cannot get devolution now, that it will be low key Government, not meddle too much, deal with things, keep things the same. It is that whole deadline keeps moving and we just try to—

Q109 **Kate Hoey:** You said yourself it is a very small country. I very much welcome the fact that local councils are becoming more active because I always thought moving to 11 was obviously the way that was meant to help give them powers and be stronger. Given that you would have stronger local councils, strong MPs hopefully and direct rule—perhaps the terminology is wrong, perhaps we should not use direct rule—or Ministers with responsibility for different aspects of Northern Ireland where there



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needed to be nationally UK-made decisions, there could be, with an Assembly as well, almost too many people being over-governed, over-elected politicians.

Colin Neill: I suppose we have that challenge and it is probably one of the reasons the councils' powers and stuff are not as much as they would be, because you have a devolved government over a small area. If you tried to do this in Liverpool, you are also creating a super council with small councils below it, population-wise. Whatever we get has to be functional, proper, ordinary, everyday government.

Q110 **Kate Hoey:** I take that. You also talked about making sure that it is sustainable. Do you think there is an elephant in the room, the whole question of whether long-term we can continue to have mandatory coalition? Is that not something that is automatically going to always lead to one side or the other being able to simply say, "We don't want this. We are walking out" and you are back to square one? Or, as a Committee, should we be looking at more radical solutions to Northern Ireland?

Seamus McAleavey: I think we thought that the process could clearly evolve over time. One of the things that the Assembly clearly lacked was an opposition. An opposition in a democracy is a good thing. The system could evolve. In terms of the Good Friday agreement, we have to ensure that all the protections are still there, but there is an opportunity for cross-community coalitions on a voluntary basis to come forward where people out there can go to the opposition and all of that. You would hope that that could evolve in the political discussions over time and we will start to make the changes as one politician pertained, referring to that ugly scaffolding that was the political arrangements that were here.

We certainly think that the only long-term, sustainable solution is a local one. It is devolution. We have to resolve our own difficulties here in Northern Ireland. Like some of the others have said here, we have to get a collegial Government. We don't believe in: you get your bit; we get our bit, whatever that happens to be. We need to sit down and agree a programme for Government and the parties, whoever they are: Sinn Féin, DUP, Ulster Unionist, Alliance, SDLP, whoever they are, to bind into that and they deliver it in a collegiate fashion. They may fall out, like they elsewhere sometimes but—

Q111 **Kate Hoey:** They would all have to start with a basic thing of wanting to make Northern Ireland work?

Seamus McAleavey: Yes.

Q112 **Nigel Mills:** Just continuing that theme, I suppose, if I asked you on a scale of one to 10 how you rated the performance of the previous Assembly and Executive, where would you put it on there? Mr Roberts, do you want to start?

Glyn Roberts: I will answer your question. What I would say is that obviously the last mandate was quite short. We had a small number of



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Government Departments, which was a step in the right direction from the previous 12 that we had. We were seeing changes on how they looked at the programme, which was good, and we saw the basis of an opposition. From a purely objective point of view, probably more resources could have been given and structure as to how the opposition operated in the previous mandate in the Assembly. I think as well, if you looked at the programme for Government discussions, it was quite tortuous; it takes nearly a year. For instance, if you look at coalition Governments elsewhere in these islands, the parties agree the programme of government first, and then they go into government. We do it in quite a complicated way. I think things like that need to change and I understand by talking to a member of the political parties issues like that have been discussed, so that is good. Devolution was good but it could have been a lot better, and I think—

Q113 **Nigel Mills:** That is like a five or a six?

Glyn Roberts: I could not possibly comment. What I would say is—

Nigel Mills: You would make a politician with that sort of answer.

Glyn Roberts: I do think that they were doing some good things, but what I would say is that at times it was quite astonishing that you would see Government Ministers attacking each other on the radio, now you wouldn't see that in any other coalition Government.

What I am saying is that there are always going to be challenges in any mandatory coalition and I think, given the nature of the past here, a mandatory coalition I hope will not be the long-term prospect; that parties here, like elsewhere, can form normal coalition Governments. I don't think we are there yet but maybe at some point as things improve that may be the case.

Q114 **Nigel Mills:** Mr Neill, are you going to give me a number?

Colin Neill: It is a work in progress. I think we have to realise from where we came from, 20 years since the Good Friday agreement is not that long. I mean Google did not exist. When Ian Paisley became First Minister they had not invented the iPhone. We are not talking about generations here where this thing has faltered. I think it is a work-in-progress, an evolution. "Could do better" used to be on my school report and I think that is very pertinent.

Nigel Mills: Must try harder.

John Armstrong: I would not put a number on it. What I would say is it has been an evolving process. I have never met a politician in this place that has not been committed to making a positive change. I have to say that. But where we have our problems is, when it comes to the difficult decisions, they have fallen back on party political lines and difficult decisions have not been taken. What we need to see going forward is greater generosity of spirit between our political parties, but it is very



much an evolving process. Apologies, I am not going to put a one to 10 score on it.

Seamus McAleavey: It is so easy to get deadlocked, if you look at the issues that have been deadlocked over the years, and sometimes then it snowballs. If you take the Maze/Long Kesh development, we haven't moved forward. I took part in the selection panel for the first recruitment of people to the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. It has not done an awful lot since. It was because of the political fallout between Sinn Féin and the DUP.

If you take something as simple as the dormant accounts issue, you will remember Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer when the dormant accounts issues were handed over to be used for charitable purposes. They got on with it in England, Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland. We haven't had had agreement. The only thing that had to be done was agree what the priorities would be in Northern Ireland. What would you like to spend the money on? The modalities are not difficult at all, but we have not agreed that.

You get that type of deadlock. If we deadlock over one thing then it just snowballs in terms of others; if you won't help me here, I am not going to help you there. That is the sort of thing that we need to resolve. That is why we keep saying we are looking for almost a Government, a national unity. We are looking for a collegiate thing, where people sign up and agree to deliver whatever it is.

Q115 **Nigel Mills:** I thought you already had. The forced coalition. The reason for asking is there is a chance that there will be arm twisting upstairs over the next few days and parties agree to reform what was there, but I suppose the lead question is how sustainable that is and can you govern like that if one or other party can decide they don't like something and pull the whole house down again? Are you saying to make this work there does need to be some radical change—that, yes, you need a party from both communities in government but does it have to be the largest parties if they will not do it? At least we ought to lose the petition of concern or restrict where it can be used or something. Do you have any other ideas for radical changes that would make the whole thing work better?

Colin Neill: It probably is, as John said, the sum of the powers. One of the decisions upstairs needs to be that, whatever is decided, it has to be sustainable; they actually need to test the model. There is no point in just going back to move forward to pick up again. I think it is about agreeing a programme for Government before we appoint Ministers, before we share out the ministerial appointments, so at least it is an agreed element so it is not about a particular party running a particular Department on their own programme for Government and somebody else is off running theirs on their own, because they are just consignment working and nothing connects.



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Glyn Roberts: I think it is proper collective responsibility. It was not so long ago that we had a five-party coalition running in Stormont. A two-party coalition is never easy, but a five—a lot of the time you did not have collective responsibility so hopefully whatever is agreed, as you say, upstairs, there will be proper collective responsibility and operate as far as possible again like a normal coalition Government, with an opposition. I think one of the big challenges, in relation to the economic impact of whatever Government hopefully is agreed, is that we need to fundamentally reboot economic policy. While the corporation tax agenda was something that we supported, we did not think enough about, for instance, investing in infrastructure. We did not think enough about how to reform business rates. We did not think enough about how we would get the right skills agenda there. All of those things are very much in the in-tray. Whoever will be Ministers, whether it is devolution or direct rule, we have a lot of work to do and Brexit is obviously top of the list. If you look at the text of the agreement before Christmas in relation to Brexit, it assumes that we will have Ministers, locally accountable Ministers, in place in relation to the next phase of negotiation and, of course, we don't.

Q116 **Kate Hoey:** Do you think it would make any difference if the mainstream parties organised properly here, so you had a proper Labour Party that allowed people to vote for them, which they don't at the moment, and the Conservative Party was revived and there was an Alliance Lib/Dem Party—which in theory there is—and then you would have directly elected Members of Parliament from those parties? Or would that change the whole debate in Northern Ireland, do you think?

Seamus McAleavey: I don't think it would. The reason I don't think it would is I do not see a massive change take place in terms of how voters vote. One of the options now for the Secretary of State is to go to another election. Well, not one of the options; it is actually laid down in the last agreement. I don't think there is anyone who thinks that the numbers will change an awful lot. Obviously, the Conservatives have stood and Labour-type candidates have stood.

Kate Hoey: Yes, but you have not had a proper Labour Party and of course it now has something like 2,000 members in Northern Ireland, which it didn't have three years ago. Anyway, sorry, Chair, it is getting off the topic. But a lot of people in England say to me, "You don't have normal politics in Northern Ireland". There is some truth in that.

Chair: I think political parties reflect society and different traditions and the long-term aspiration is clearly the normalisation of politics throughout the United Kingdom, but I suspect we have touched upon that. That is a work-in-progress and is not going to happen overnight.

Q117 **John Grogan:** I have been reflecting, Chair, if the people of Keighley where I represent were asked to give me a number between one and 10, I think I would settle for a five or a six. I am envious in a way, representing a seat in Yorkshire, and I can see your frustration because



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we are talking about devolution in Yorkshire at the moment and we don't have nearly as much as is on the table to be resumed in Northern Ireland. I have a couple of questions. You make such a powerful case and it is such a united case from all sections of society, is it a case that you are able to make to the political parties here in Northern Ireland, now that you have had the opportunity to express your frustration to them and how did they react? It seems to me that all the major interested organisations seem to be of one mind, how do they respond?

Colin Neill: It is fair to say that we have all made the point on numerous occasions, on numerous dates and to numerous people.

John Armstrong: I was at a dinner before Christmas and the heads of both the main parties were there, at the same table, but I spoke to them separately.

Q118 **Lady Hermon:** Is that the head of the DUP?

John Armstrong: Sinn Féin and the DUP, yes. They both said to me privately, "We are committed to getting back into government. We want the Assembly back, no question". You get that from all political parties. I am assuming that is what you are saying, Colin?

Colin Neill: Absolutely.

John Armstrong: When you talk to them individually, yes, there is that commitment but then we seem to go back into the trenches, or they seem to go back into the trenches.

Q119 **Kate Hoey:** They should be going back without any preconditions, probably. That would be the best thing, would it not?

John Armstrong: You would have thought so, yes.

Q120 **Kate Hoey:** Then you sort out your problems.

Glyn Roberts: All of us have signed joint statements. We have stood outside this building holding big placards saying that we want Stormont back. We all of us meet the leadership of the five political parties on a regular basis, and obviously they do listen and say some encouraging things in public. The missing thing in all of this is, is there the political will to secure a new agreement and move on? I think that is the big question. I hope, obviously, we have a new Secretary of State, we have all five parties involved in the negotiations now and I would hope that that will see perhaps different outcomes than we have had in the past.

Seamus McAleavey: I am meeting all the political parties and their leadership and meeting people, politicians, when they were Ministers. They were thoroughly decent people in their own right and we get on extremely well. They are very supportive of a lot of the issues that we will be raising with them. The Northern Ireland problem tends to boil down to: if there is ever a conflict it is their problem. Both or all sides will tell us they are ready for engagement but it is the other crowd who are



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preventing it from happening. Certainly, what strikes me—and this is the really difficult one because I don't think you can legislate for this at all—is there needs to be change in behaviours, in terms of how they engage with each other. It needs to be done in a more professional way or whatever and with more respect. There is absolutely no doubt about that.

We all have our differences. All our organisations all have differences and if we were to talk about a budget briefing I will say things that are different than Glyn, but we do it in a reasonable and respectful way and that is where the politics needs to shift a little bit in Northern Ireland. We have been clear in public as well in terms of: if I was interviewed by the BBC I would say we would like devolution. We would like an agreement but not at any price. A sticking plaster is no good. The idea of patching something over and it falls apart in a little while, again that just damages it. It makes people even more cynical.

Going back to the point about the political parties, we vote for them, all of us, and as I say the public carry the contradictions. I can tell you when I meet people from voluntary community organisations I know that people vote for Sinn Féin. They vote for the DUP. They vote for the Ulster Unionists. I have a fair idea. I hear unanimity from them, in that they will be supportive of their politician and their party and they will vote for them but they will also complain that they need to get on with doing the job. I think what the politicians have to do is balance these conversations. You have to figure out how far you can go on any of these things because your public will give you different views.

Q121 John Grogan: Yes, what some people say might concentrate the mind is this issue of the salaries and things that, at the moment, it would be something that Westminster would have to move on but it could be legislated on. It is a matter of course really, if the Assembly is up and functioning and the Executive is there you get your full salary, if not perhaps half a salary is sufficient. Would something like that maybe concentrate them perhaps?

Colin Neill: I don't think it is a money game. With great respect, all of the MLAs we have dealt with are generally decent people trying to do what they are elected to. I don't think it is a money issue, to be honest. Saying that, "I am going to take X grand off of you a year" is not going to make them say "Oh then I will go". It is principle and elements of tradition that are tying us down.

Q122 John Grogan: It is public money, though, isn't it, and from the point of view—

Colin Neill: I take your point. The problem is—I am speaking beyond my mandate now—if you take away the political infrastructure of the current MLAs and you do go into this for a number of years, how do you bring that back?

Q123 John Grogan: I see, yes. The fact that that infrastructure is still there is



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helpful in the current circumstances, yes.

John Armstrong: I would also suspect that a good proportion of the work that MLAs do is on a constituency basis. It is probably continuing. I would be surprised if it is not.

John Grogan: Indeed, I am sure it is.

John Armstrong: So we have to be careful.

Q124 **John Grogan:** No, I understand. Two final questions, which were inspired by our visit to Brussels. From my mind, there are two real benefits to running a functioning Executive. One is the decisions they can take but also it is the banging the drum for Northern Ireland or wherever it may be. It was quite clear that everyone in Brussels was desperate for a strong Northern Ireland voice. On tourism, for example, the Secretary of State appeared before us yesterday and that was the first topic. She was going on about the golf and everything—

Colin Neill: We were very fortunate. Our previous Department had—

Q125 **John Grogan:** Exactly. The golf is not coming up. You have hinted at some of it. If I was the Northern Ireland Tourism Minister, and you were the principal adviser, what are the types of things? You mentioned licensing laws, and what you would like to do with them. You mentioned VAT. The Chancellor did a study on that last year, and the aim is to try to get it back. Just say a little bit more on tourism, Mr Neill.

Colin Neill: Tourism is one of our fastest growing sectors. We are coming from a low level. A tourist in Northern Ireland spends half of what they spend anywhere else on the island of Ireland, so we have huge potential just to take current tourist spend and turn that into a higher level of funding.

On the issue of both tourism and hospitality matters, this is called in the European legislation an air passenger duty. We are at a huge disadvantage, as you have already gone through. We have the highest air passenger duty of anywhere in the world. We sit, on the Northern Ireland border, at 9% and it is a very price-sensitive market. Our figures were through the roof because sterling basically levelled it for us for a while, but you cannot plan on an exchange rate. Those two elements are part of the Conservative-DUP confidence and supply agreement. Treasury has undertaken to do research on both of them by the next budget and we will see the workings out of that, but those would be huge boosts to us.

There are other elements on the tourism side. If we look at our industrial strategy, I think it referred to tourism in two sub-paragraphs somewhere. Indeed the UK industrial strategy was not much better, but at least they had been given the opportunity to address that. We need tourism to be given its priority because there are huge opportunities—there are 30,000 job vacancies over the next six years—huge potential. I have to declare I



am a board member of Tourism Northern Ireland, but I am not campaigning for them today, I am campaigning for our members.

When you look at tourism in Northern Ireland, Ireland is like a company government. We have seen a 45% reduction in their programme budget. You see them facing a 10% reduction now, whereas my members are building new hotels and new restaurants. We have five new hotels on the ground. We will add 1,200 rooms within this year. As we put more rooms into the marketplace, promotion and training budgets are being reduced. Tourism is one of those products that you have to put it at somewhere where it is a risk of being bought. We have to put it in your mind before you choose to come. We really need people in Government who will look at the winners in our industry, look at the opportunities, and back us with them.

Q126 John Grogan: Thank you. A final question on the other aspect that struck me from the Secretary of State yesterday. We were talking about the £1 billion, the extra £1 billion, which Northern Ireland is fortunate to have. I think I am doing justice to her remarks. She was saying that some money had been spent in education and health but the big infrastructure projects—she mentioned some of the same ones you have mentioned, York Street was one—really required Executive sign-off, the Executive being there to sign them off. From your point of view, how crucial and critical to the country are these big infrastructure projects?

John Armstrong: The big ones, the flagship projects that we referred to there, do have political sign-off. We know with some degree of certainty, but the concern is that beyond that we don't know how the monies are going to be spent. That is the danger, going forward, because construction companies in Northern Ireland are small or medium-sized and dependent on infrastructure expenditure.

The other key thing with the monies coming from the Conservative-DUP confidence and supply agreement is it is critically important that we see that money starting to flow quite quickly. The capital budgets are all predicated pretty heavily on that, so we must see that flowing quickly. We obviously welcome that and this is not a political statement; it is just a statement of fact. We need to see that money coming through.

Q127 Lady Hermon: You should read the evidence of David Sterling about the money coming through, or not coming through.

Two or three questions, please. We touched on Brexit in various ways. Can I ask each of you: who do you actually believe speaks for Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations at present?

Glyn Roberts: That is a very good question. It is exactly the same question the Taoiseach asked.

Lady Hermon: We will come back to the Taoiseach.



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Glyn Roberts: Absolutely. The previous Secretary of State was in Brussels on a number of occasions. In many respects, a lot of other organisations have been setting out their stalls in relation to Brexit, so business organisations. A number of us gave evidence to the Brexit Select Committee, when it was here, just before Christmas. We had a very good session with them.

Lady Hermon: Yes, but who speaks for Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations? That is a select committee, essentially. Who speaks? Is it the Brexit Department, or the Secretary of State for Brexit? Is it David Davis?

Glyn Roberts: Without doubt, it probably is the Secretary of State. The First Ministers of Scotland and Wales have met with Michel Barnier on a number of occasions. They are very vocal in terms of, for instance the group of people setting out their stalls. We don't see the same thing here in relation to a corporate view of the Stormont Administration. To be perfectly honest—

Q128 **Lady Hermon:** That is what is wanted.

Glyn Roberts: Yes. The DUP and Sinn Féin in the previous Administration did sign a letter, which wasn't too far away from the collective position of the business organisations.

Lady Hermon: That was Arlene Foster, as First Minister, and the late Martin McGuinness, who jointly signed that. Yes.

Seamus McAleavey: No one speaks for Northern Ireland, politically on this issue. There is no question about that.

Q129 **Lady Hermon:** That must be a deep frustration. It is a bit sad.

Seamus McAleavey: It is a deep frustration. I am involved in a number of stakeholder groups with Departments. We think the Brexit issue is extremely important and that we only get one chance to influence what happens. There are multi-layered levels of discussion going on, obviously, at Westminster and Whitehall, about what might be devolved where, and all of that. We are left, again, that Northern Ireland civil servants have to occupy some of the space and they are feeding into the Whitehall Department and the Department for Exiting the EU, but civil servants are restricted. They are not politicians. They cannot say, "This is what the position is with regard to it. This is what we believe to be the lever" or whatever.

Q130 **Lady Hermon:** There is a serious deficit in the Brexit negotiations.

Seamus McAleavey: There is a serious deficit. The civic society organisations meet with the Secretary of State, give our views, say very clearly what they are and hope that the Secretary of State feeds that back in to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—it is not part of the core Cabinet group on Brexit—and things like that. Our attitude is that we



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will talk to anyone, the Irish Government, the Brussels side or whoever, to try to influence things, but we miss the political voice.

John Armstrong: I would agree with Seamus; absolutely, exactly.

Lady Hermon: Mr Neill, you are nodding your head.

Colin Neill: Lady Hermon, in the absence of an Assembly, we have to put our faith in our elected MPs who are actually fighting in our corner in Westminster, and indeed even through the good offices of this Committee, that—

Q131 **Lady Hermon:** As you know, some of them do not take their seats, so how do you expect them to make representations to Government?

Colin Neill: Obviously we never comment on their choice, but they do reassure us that they lobby and talk to people behind the scenes. It is our only channel of elected Members to engage with until such times as we get an Assembly to represent us.

Glyn Roberts: If I can just say, as a follow-through, I was very struck with David Sterling, who told your Committee that there were 500 pieces of legislation that needed to be passed as a result of the EU Withdrawal Bill. I would be very interested in how you address that in the absence of an Assembly. I suspect there is a huge amount of other legislation that needs to be passed, so there is an immediate challenge. For instance, how are those 500 pieces of legislation to be passed?

Q132 **Kate Hoey:** Following on from that, do you think, if there was a form of direct rule, that there should be a specific Minister now appointed to be the Brexit Minister, in terms of completely understanding what is going on and being that person representing—in whatever way they can—the wider interests of Northern Ireland?

Seamus McAleavey: As you know, particularly if you take the situation with regard to the land border, there is a lot to get to understand in terms of the nuances, the likely impact. Somebody has to get to grips with that. Personally, I think that is where a Northern Ireland Executive does become really important. It is all a matter of trust; who you trust that will stand up and fight the corner, wherever it needs to be fought, to get the best deal for people here.

People think—I think—that the Secretary of State or a UK Minister would have a mixed position, given their own constituency and who they really are responsible to, collective Cabinet decision-making and so on.

Kate Hoey: Yes. There is clearly an absolute vacuum there, in terms of the Government in Northern Ireland, and it cannot go on and that is certainly the message that we have all been getting.

Lady Hermon: One final question, thank you, Chair. Again, we have touched on it but we have not come to any formal conclusion. The Secretary of State reminded us yesterday that she has the legal option to



call a November Northern Ireland Assembly election. Could we ask again for the range of views? Do you believe there is an appetite among the general public for an Assembly election?

Seamus McAleavey: I think there is a great deal of cynicism now and that is a danger to the process, that people are being turned off voting because they see the same old thing happening again. What you would probably see in that scenario is a significant drop in voter turnout.

Q133 **Lady Hermon:** You don't think that the fear card—we have seen that political parties often play a fear card—would generate a turnout at the ballot box?

John Armstrong: It might do, but I do sense that there is a lot of cynicism and scepticism creeping in now, people saying, "What's the point of it?" so there needs to be confidence-building, before an election.

Glyn Roberts: There were two elections in 2017. The last thing we need is another election. The parties need to get on, do the deal and get this place up and running again. It is as simple as that.

Lady Hermon: That is a very clear answer.

Colin Neill: Lady Hermon, I think our children think it is part of the annual school holidays, to have an election.

Lady Hermon: It is not probably accurate but it's a dreadful impression.

Colin Neill: I honestly think that if there is a deal that can be done, it has to be done now. Another election will not make a difference.

Seamus McAleavey: An election might have to be had if we are not getting anywhere because it is part of the process, as such. From all the people talking, I don't think there is a huge appetite on the part of the public. I don't think they expect to change much. There would be some changes around the edges but I don't think they expect to change much. I think what public are saying is, "I'm not likely to change my vote much". I think there is a danger that we could end up with more people not voting as they become fed up and cynical.

Q134 **Lady Hermon:** The general view is: if you are advising the Secretary of State whether to hold another Assembly election, you would collectively be saying, "No, not at this time"?

Glyn Roberts: If you ask my view, I would say absolutely not. It is very clear the political parties need to get this sorted out.

Seamus McAleavey: I think not unless the political parties were to come in with a different manifesto; had got to a position where they had negotiated a deal and wanted to take it to the electorate.

John Armstrong: I agree.

Seamus McAleavey: The only caveat is that, if it is decreed as part of



the process, then I think it probably has to be had. We have to exhaust all the opportunities.

Lady Hermon: We have to make change.

Seamus McAleavey: But I fear, as you well know, Northern Ireland elections can help make things more divisive at times, in terms of how those elections are fought.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed, a very insightful session. I take away a degree of urgency around this, quite a lot of urgency because decisions need to be made; pragmatism on your part around the preference, clearly, for devolution, but if that isn't going to happen, direct rule. However, I am getting the sense that either option, you want it to be full-fat I think—as you graphically described it—not care and maintenance. We get that. We would understand that very well.

Also, thank you for your remarks on Brexit. As chairman of the Select Committee, I have taken the unusual step of writing to the Prime Minister about this following the evidence that we gathered in Brussels recently. What I would say in mitigation is that Michel Barnier, having some experience of Northern Ireland, appeared to me to understand this and very kindly invited us back to quiz him and to put the case for Northern Ireland, admittedly in the imperfect way we are able to do it as the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. We must all find ways of trying to make sure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard as loudly and as clearly as possible while these negotiations are ongoing. Thank you ever so much for sparing the time to speak to us today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gavin Boyd, Anne Connolly, Amanda Stewart and Martin Dillon.

Q135 **Chair:** Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It is good to see you. Thank you so much for sparing the time. Thank you, also, for your patience. We had a session inserted into the programme on an opportunistic basis, which was extremely useful. Thank you very much for your indulgence in allowing that to happen before this main session.

What I would like you to do, if you would—probably from left to right—is to introduce yourselves and say where you see the situation being at the moment from the perspective of your organisations.

Amanda Stewart: Good afternoon. My name is Amanda Stewart and I am the Northern Ireland Policing Board's Chief Executive. I am joined today by Anne Connolly. I am going to let Anne set out the position in terms of the Policing Board. I am happy to answer any questions from an organisational perspective today and Anne, obviously, will be answering questions from a board perspective. I will allow Anne to set out the position of the Policing Board.



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Anne Connolly: Anne Connolly, Chair of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, a position I have been privileged to have for five years. The current situation we are in—I outlined it in the letter to you—is slightly different from that of my two colleagues on my right because we are in a bit of limbo. Currently the board is not fully constituted, as we are required to have a number of 10 MLAs on it and we don't have any. Therefore, we are in a position of needing a board to be constituted fairly quickly. That does not mean to say we are not doing things. It means that our statutory duties cannot be carried out, but obviously there is a raft of non-statutory duties that we deal with. We have just come from a meeting this morning with local politicians and the independent members, updating them on where we are with policing.

Gavin Boyd: Good afternoon. My name is Gavin Boyd. I am chief executive of the Education Authority. The Education Authority, as the name suggests, is the regional educational authority for Northern Ireland. We are the funding authority for all schools. We are the planning authority for schools. We supply most of the support services for schools, so we are responsible for managing virtually the whole of the education budget.

The situation in education is really quite stark. In real terms, the education budget in Northern Ireland is about 10% less than it was in 2010-11. That is about a £200 million reduction in the cash value of the budget. We quite simply have come to the situation that we don't have enough resource to run the system as it is currently structured. It is a very heavily engineered system. We are not saying that we don't have enough money to education 340,000 children. What we are saying very clearly is that we don't have enough money to educate 340,000 children the way that we currently do.

Our plea at the minute is not for more money, although the Department of Education's projection for the incoming financial year is that there will be a shortfall in the education budget of the order of £134 million. Our plea is not that we simply get more money. Our plea is that we enter into a significant transformation of the education sector so that it is better able to meet the needs of our young people as they face the challenges of the future.

Martin Dillon: Good afternoon. My name is Martin Dillon. I am Chief Executive of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. I have the very great privilege of being in that position. I come from an organisation with about 22,000 staff and a budget of about £1.4 billion, an organisation that looks after a local catchment population of about 340,000 within the population of Northern Ireland of 1.8 million, as the provider of all but one of the regional tertiary services.

I want to explain a bit about the context in which we sit in the system. As you know, we have the Department of Health, which is responsible for strategy, policy, guidance and direction. Below that, we have the Health



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and Social Care Board, which is responsible for translating the Minister's intentions and then commissioning plan and commissioning services from the six Health and Social Care Trusts, of which we are one. We work very much at the operational level. It would be the Department of Health who would have the interplay and interaction with the Minister. We normally would not be sighted on that interplay or interaction, nor would we need to be. We are very much at the operational and delivery level of the service, immersed in day-to-day operational decisions and day-to-day operation of care delivery services.

Q136 Chair: Thank you. That is very clear and I appreciate the difference between the Policing Board and the other parts of the public sector. We have heard from George Hamilton about the frustrations he has with accountability and democratic structures, as far as they relate to policing, that would be accepted as being routine and normal throughout the rest of the United Kingdom.

Perhaps I can start in my questioning with Mr Boyd. You mentioned the word "transformation". Transformation usually requires the presence of not just civil servants but politicians. Can you describe how the process that you have outlined—that is one of transformation, which of course also relates to health care, and the Bengoa Report—impacts on what you are able to do, given there are no politicians, there are no Ministers, to make the key decisions who, I suspect you are going to tell me, are necessary in order to make the changes that you have referred to?

Gavin Boyd: Sure, that is absolutely right. As far as we are concerned, the sorts of changes that we believe we need to see require political decision-makers. These are political decisions because they impact on every aspect of our society, our economy, of the wider community. As bureaucrats, we can make proposals, we can cost various options, but actually, in our view, these are decisions that should ultimately properly be made by politicians with their particular perspective.

Let me give you a couple of examples. We have a very good aspirational programme for Government but, as we are currently constituted, we don't believe that the education system can deliver on those aspirations for the programme for Government. That is a political matter because the programme for Government has a vision for Northern Ireland community, for the economy, for our wider society.

Let me take a different aspect. We have a sustainable schools policy but about one-third of our schools in Northern Ireland are operating below the sustainable schools indicators. A decision to reorganise a school, to close a school, to amalgamate a school, in Northern Ireland, appears to me as if it is almost as difficult as trying to close a hospital. These are issues that impact on communities, on our wider society. They are decisions that are properly made by politicians.

Chair: Yes, we have that, loud and clear.

Q137 Lady Hermon: Thank you very much indeed. We will begin with the



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Policing Board. Anne, if I might just take your first name, you said you were in a bit of limbo; that is how you described it.

Anne Connolly: Yes.

Q138 **Lady Hermon:** How has that impacted on your job with the Policing Board?

Anne Connolly: It has made my job very difficult. Contrary to what people would think, it has made it busier because I tend to then have to carry out a number of duties that ordinarily other people would do. For example, the Minister of Justice being invited to do something with local policing partnership, I have been asked to do that. It has made my job difficult in more ways than that, however, because I am responsible for ensuring that there is a policing plan, which is the basis on which the police service works, which they need. That cannot be advanced. It cannot even get to the stage that Gavin's organisation would get to, because we don't have the board to approve it before it would go to the Minister.

Q139 **Lady Hermon:** You are in limbo in fact.

Anne Connolly: We are in limbo with 50 statutory functions. There are probably about 500 non-statutory functions, which we can still continue to do, but the statutory functions of the Policing Board, which are set out clearly in the legislation, cannot be fulfilled because the legislation states very clearly the board requires 10 MLAs and nine independent members, and we currently have just the nine independent members.

Q140 **Lady Hermon:** You have very significant statutory duties, which cannot and have not been, performed.

Anne Connolly: They have not been performed. As well as that, it has huge impact on public confidence because, as far as they are concerned, we are not holding the police to account. Accountability is no longer in the public domain even though, as you heard from the Chief Constable, and you would hear from me—we just had a meeting this morning—that is not the case in terms of meetings, discussion and challenge. However, there is no mechanism for getting that out to the wider public to publish it.

Q141 **Lady Hermon:** You have had to continue without. The Policing Board was constructed by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. Is that correct?

Anne Connolly: Yes.

Q142 **Lady Hermon:** We have had the legislation in place for almost 18 years.

Anne Connolly: Yes.

Q143 **Lady Hermon:** The Policing Board is composed of 19 members, nine who are independent and 10 who are MLAs, Assembly politicians.



Anne Connolly: Yes.

Q144 **Lady Hermon:** Do you mind me asking what you think the MLAs contributed to the Policing Board when they did sit?

Anne Connolly: My experience of the MLAs—not all individuals—is they were very committed to the Policing Board, took it very seriously; all of them would have been on committees, which is another area that is where all of the real questioning and the challenge would happen. They were very good at attending the meetings. I believe they also presented a public persona, which generally the public appreciated because they saw that there were politicians on the board. It also provided a very good link between us and the Department of Justice and, of course, the Justice Committee, which we formed a very good relationship with. My view is that they did contribute well. The difficulty is, if they are not there, it cannot happen and that is very unsatisfactory.

Q145 **Lady Hermon:** In the 18 years of the Policing Board, has there ever been a review of how effective the Policing Board is and its composition—as it is presently constructed—of 19 members?

Anne Connolly: You are getting into my continuous improvement territory now. There has not been a review as such. I believe that the previous Minister had plans to do that. Again, I am not concerned about who the members are. I am more concerned about making sure that we provide the skills mix to manage it. It does need to be reviewed, like any other public service organisation. For example, I used to be in education, as you know, and that has changed. The library service, which I helped to establish, has changed. Policing is probably the only public body that has not been changed. The police service itself has had to make lots of changes, but the Policing Board has stood still. That does not mean to say that a review would recommend anything different, but I believe people would feel that at least somebody has looked at it and said it is good, or it is working well, it is fit for purpose, or not, as the case may be.

Q146 **Lady Hermon:** In that reply you have described when we did have those close links with the Department of Justice. How has it impacted on the Policing Board, that we don't have a Minister for Justice?

Anne Connolly: It has impacted quite badly. For example, next week would have been my accountability review meeting with the Minister. That will be held with the Permanent Secretary. Things like that will still go on but it is not the same, in that they cannot take the decisions that the Policing Board need to be taken. Even if we were to make a senior police appointment tomorrow, we would need ministerial approval. There are decisions to be taken.

Q147 **Lady Hermon:** Just take your time with that. If we made an appointment to the senior ranks, it would be the case now that we actually could not do it?



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Anne Connolly: No.

Q148 **Lady Hermon:** How senior is senior?

Anne Connolly: Chief Superintendent up.

Q149 **Lady Hermon:** Chief Superintendent up we could not—

Anne Connolly: Yes. We need ministerial approval for ACCs and the Chief Constable.

Amanda Stewart: Also, senior civilian staff.

Anne Connolly: Yes, and we have some vacancies at present.

Q150 **Lady Hermon:** At senior level?

Amanda Stewart: Senior civilian staff, for which the board is responsible.

Q151 **Lady Hermon:** We have vacancies, including Chief Superintendent?

Anne Connolly: No, from above that.

Q152 **Lady Hermon:** The vacancies are in operational posts? Or are they in the civilian staff?

Amanda Stewart: The civilian side.

Lady Hermon: The civilian side.

Amanda Stewart: Which are the temporary promotions at the moment.

Anne Connolly: Which has a knock-on effect on the rest of the organisation, obviously.

Lady Hermon: Of course.

Anne Connolly: We are maintaining the status quo rather than helping the police to develop. They have just produced a new corporate plan, which we are working with them on. Again, that is going to sit, because we don't have the challenge around that.

We have been pushing the police very hard to look at the staffing side of it because, from my experience, if you have a good infrastructure on the organisational development side, then everything else will flow. That is an area that we have managed to persuade them they need to do a lot of work in but we cannot make the appointments, or even have the discussions about what appointments we might need.

Q153 **Lady Hermon:** Good grief. This is like asking about the ball of string. How long do you think you could continue like this with the Policing Board? Policing is a very significant issue.

Anne Connolly: We cannot really continue because, strictly speaking, by the end of March we cannot draw down the money. There are two



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organisations—Amanda reports to me and the Chief Constable does—we have PSNI and we have the Policing Board. Come March, we will not be able to draw down cash from the PSNI. We draw down about £10 million per week. It is a huge amount of money that the police have access to. We cannot do that; that stops in March. Somebody will find a way to do it, I am sure, but that is not—

Q154 **Lady Hermon:** When in March? When is D-day in March then?

Amanda Stewart: It will be the next financial year, so the decision that was taken as an organisation, the Policing Board made some arrangements to prepare for this situation. At the last Policing Board meeting, delegated authority was given to the Chair, the Vice-Chair and to me, as Chief Executive, to continue on with a number of functions to keep the organisation running and to keep the flow of money going to PSNI. That decision taken last year was bound to the current financial year. That means that, come 1 April, I will not be in a position, as the accounting officer in the board, to allow payments and cash drawdowns to PSNI, because there is no board to agree the budget. There is no budget as such agreed, so it would be expenditure outwith the appraisal process.

Q155 **Lady Hermon:** When you say “runs out”, who runs out of money?

Amanda Stewart: PSNI.

Q156 **Lady Hermon:** PSNI would run out money on 1 April?

Kate Hoey: Unless there is a budget before that, which is why there is a deadline next week.

Anne Connolly: Yes, but apart from that, it is totally unsatisfactory. You are either holding the police to account or you are not. We don't have our public meetings. We have had some public seminars and it is interesting to note that in some of those we have had 80 to 100 people coming, because they obviously missed knowing that there is a Policing Board meeting in public. They have been very, very positive. But we don't have our public meetings. We don't have our committees, so the scrutiny, the detail, the level of scrutiny that would be applied cannot happen. This is the practical stuff coming in now. The money is not going to be there.

Q157 **Lady Hermon:** We are not going to run out of money for the police then? What are they—

Amanda Stewart: The money will be there.

Anne Connolly: The money will be there, we just cannot access it.

Amanda Stewart: It is just there needs to be some sort of arrangement put in place that allows us to draw that money down for PSNI. The budget needs to be approved by a Policing Board, so even a decision next week around a budget will not fix this particular situation. I have escalated it to the Department of Justice. The Department is looking at it



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and has said to me that it will find some solution around it, come 1 April the drawdown is—

Q158 **Lady Hermon:** You need a full Policing Board to agree the budget for the PSNI?

Anne Connolly: Yes.

Amanda Stewart: That normally takes place in February every year.

Q159 **Lady Hermon:** There is definitely a timetable here on this?

Anne Connolly: Most definitely. We have been flagging this up with numerous people. We have been with the DoJ. We have raised it with the current Secretary of State as well.

Q160 **Lady Hermon:** The new Secretary of State?

Anne Connolly: Yes, we have.

Q161 **Lady Hermon:** This point has been made to her, how critical it is, the fact of money and the Policing Board, it is having the Policing Board re-established?

Anne Connolly: Yes, it is urgent.

Q162 **Lady Hermon:** Let us be positive: if we had the Assembly up and running, do you know which MLAs would sit on the Policing Board?

Anne Connolly: No, we don't.

Q163 **Lady Hermon:** How long would that process take? Is it different?

Anne Connolly: It could take three weeks, depending. What normally happens is that, when a Minister is appointed, the Minister will write out to the leader of the parties and the parties would nominate the people for the Policing Board. Then the Minister would write to us and say they were there. But then there is a period of bedding in, where, particularly if it was new members, they would need to be brought up-to-date. Even issues like induction and training, because some members may not have sat on panels before. You just cannot go and sit on a panel to appoint an Assistant Chief Constable—or indeed, anyone—if you haven't. That all has to be done and if it is not done properly then chaos can ensue further down the line. Realistically, you are probably talking about a month before we would have a full board in place.

Amanda Stewart: The other issue that has come up, Lady Hermon, is that three of the independent members' term of office expires at the end of May, and the Minister makes appointments of independent members to the Policing Board as well. Under normal circumstances, that competition probably would have been launched at this stage and it would be ongoing with the Minister. In the absence of a Minister, the Department has not been able to take that forward so, come the end of May, there will be three independent members whose term of office comes to an end also.



Q164 **Lady Hermon:** You have flagged these issues up to the newly-appointed Secretary of State. Were you persuaded that in fact she understood the seriousness of the situation?

Anne Connolly: I think she does. It was very early days and we did not get into any detail. She has promised that she will meet with us again. She has met with the Chief Constable. I think she is aware of it and I would be surprised if most people are not aware of it now, because we have been moving, particularly with DoJ, and saying, "We need something to be done about this". It is difficult as well because they don't have the Minister. We had a very good meeting this morning and we thought, "If only this was the board meeting" because we were discussing very difficult issues. We were discussing the paramilitaries, we were discussing legacy, we were discussing budgets, so there was a range of everyday policing issues as well as other issues.

Q165 **Lady Hermon:** This is a meeting with the MLAs?

Anne Connolly: Invited MLAs are nominated by the party to come and the independents. It was a briefing with the Chief Constable and the senior team all there. It would be much better time spent if it had been a full board and we could have taken forward some of the issues.

Q166 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you. Mr Boyd, may I ask you how you feel a lack of a Minister giving direction to your Department has impacted on pupils, on schools?

Gavin Boyd: Lady Hermon, I am more concerned looking into the immediate future, because our position is effectively we have run out of road financially with the current system, as currently structured. I did say in my opening remarks that, if nothing else changes, education will considerably overspend its budget next year. We have to put that in the context of some of what we do in education in Northern Ireland is world class. A lot of what we do is very good; some of what we do isn't at all good. Our position is we need to be fundamentally looking at what we do all the time. We are in urgent need of transformation, looking at what we do and how we do it.

My concern is that that sort of activity is appropriately led and shaped by the Minister and politicians. It is one thing for a bureaucrat like me to look after an organisation in steady state, in current maintenance mode. But when we are talking about fundamental changes in direction, those are political issues appropriately dealt with by politicians. We are right at that point where we need to be making progress on these issues.

Q167 **Lady Hermon:** If you don't mind me interrupting, just to say that in fact you made a very clear plea. You said it was not a plea for more money. It was a plea for transformation of the education sector. Presumably, since we have not had an Education Minister for over a year, you know where you want the Department to go. You know where you want education to go. Is there a plan, a blueprint ready for transformation that you are going to be able to lay in front of the Education Minister—as I say, being



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optimistic here—that in fact we get the Assembly up and running and we have an Education Minister? Presumably, the groundwork has been done. I want you to tell us we are not waiting for a new Minister to come in and then to read themselves in and come up with a plan for transformation. It is the other way around.

Gavin Boyd: I am going to be slightly more circumspect, if you don't mind. We have very clear ideas on what we think the appropriate solutions are. We have a very clear perspective, but education and the impact of education goes beyond the education sector. I made the comment earlier that it reaches into every aspect of our society here. That is why we believe we need the wider perspective. Yes, we would be in a position to give incoming Ministers a very clear briefing. In fact, in fairness to our local politicians, most of them are pretty active and we are talking to them all of the time. I believe that an incoming Minister would grasp the issues very quickly, but we would be looking for them to bring political leadership.

Let me give you a very simple example. When Minister Weir came into office, he gave me, as an official, a very clear direction on what he wanted to happen in terms of area planning—that is the planning of the schools estate—and he brought a perspective and an impetus to that, because, as Minister, he had a very clear idea of what he wanted to achieve. Once I had that clear direction from the Minister, we then had a mandate to go and start working on this. In the absence of a mandate, the change becomes considerably more difficult. I don't think it has the same credibility among the wider community.

Q168 **Lady Hermon:** Do we have a blueprint or not?

Gavin Boyd: The other point that I should have made is: we have very clear perspectives. We have very clear ideas of what we want to do but, because this is fundamentally important to the community, part of our argument is that, as a community, we need to decide what it is we want from our education system and how we are prepared to resource it on that basis. There are resourcing issues. There is a finite amount of resource, but the community has to decide what the appropriate balance of resource is. I have a clear perspective. The Education Authority has a clear perspective, but it has to be matched up against the overall demand in the health sector, the policing sector, for example, and across the whole community. Yes, we have thoughts and ideas, but there is a wider perspective that has to be applied.

Q169 **Lady Hermon:** Has there been any consultation with the public about the perspective that you would like to advance within the Education Authority?

Gavin Boyd: Essentially, what we have been doing over the last three or four months is trying to get the message out there to everyone that we need fundamental change. We have been working at that level, planting



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the seeds in there and trying to encourage the debate. That is the point that we have come to at this stage.

Q170 **Lady Hermon:** We will move on to health then, if you don't mind, Mr Dillon. Could you outline how the absence of an Assembly and the absence of a Minister have impacted, for example, on nurses and nurses' pay?

Martin Dillon: There has been public sector pay restraint for some time now. I am very much aware that our agenda to change pay bandings for nurses have fallen behind those in other parts of the United Kingdom. That can have potentially the impact of demoralising our workforce.

Q171 **Lady Hermon:** Yes. Would you say that your workforce is demoralised?

Martin Dillon: Without recourse to surveys and so on, I could not say with certainty what level that is at. What became very clear a few months ago is that there was restlessness about progress in relation to this year's 1% pay award. Initially, people were being advised that that could not be awarded in the absence of a Minister. A work-around was found and that pay award has subsequently been advanced and is in the process of being paid at this point in time.

Q172 **Lady Hermon:** How was it worked around? That sounds like a good idea.

Martin Dillon: That would be a question for the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health. They took that matter forward with Department of Finance and the Acting Head of the Civil Service.

Q173 **Lady Hermon:** In the absence of a local Health Minister, do you have linkage, for example, with the Secretary of State for Health based at Westminster, Jeremy Hunt? Do you have linkage into the Department of Health in England?

Martin Dillon: As I said in my opening remarks, we are very much a health and social care delivery organisation, working very much at the operational level and have considerable operational freedom to get on with the delivery of service on the ground. We are quite a distance removed from those whose job it is to support the Minister.

What I would say, though, is that the single biggest impact for us has been in the arena of financial planning and in budget and financial management because in this current financial year, because of the delay in setting a budget for Northern Ireland in the absence of a Finance Minister, our Department of Health did not know with certainty its allocation until some considerable time into the financial year. Therefore, the Health and Social Care Board did not know its allocation and, subsequently, the Health and Social Care Trust did not know their allocation, so we were not able to plan with any degree of certainty or set our budgets for divisions within our organisation. The issue with that is that, once you don't have that certainty, your financial planning isn't as robust as it should be.



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As it transpired, the budget set allocated us less than we thought we might get. There was a considerable gap between what we need and what we got. When you only know about these things later in the financial year, and you are asked to close that gap, you are then into the business of coming up with a proposal to rationalise or consolidate or downturn services, which are in themselves major and controversial proposals, which in turn would need ministerial endorsement to proceed with them following public consultation.

As it happens, this year additional money was found in the October monitoring, which headed all of this off. I cannot say what would have happened in the event that money had not been found, and who it was who would have to decide on implementing those major and controversial proposals. Presumably, it would have to have been the Permanent Secretary in the absence of a Minister.

Q174 Lady Hermon: Would you say—and I am not putting words in your mouth—that in fact there has been a negative impact on patients, on nursing staff and on medical staff, on account of having no Minister responsible for health in Northern Ireland for over a year?

Martin Dillon: The ability to properly financial plan has been an issue for us. The other thing I would call out is that, following on from what others have said, the previous Health Minister, as I have said, had a very clear vision for transformation in the health and social care sector.

Q175 Lady Hermon: It is great having a vision. I just want to ask about the patients on the ground, constituents who need operations, constituents who go into A&E. My question was very simple: has there been a negative impact on patients, on nursing staff and on other medical staff as a consequence of not having a Minister for over a year in Northern Ireland?

Martin Dillon: In health, through the Department of Health, through the Health Board and indeed three trusts, we have highlighted where it is we think we need significant additional investment. One of the areas in which we need significant additional investment, alongside transformation, is in relation to people who are waiting for elective procedures. The waiting lists in Northern Ireland are growing longer. I suppose a Minister would be able to lobby with their Executive colleagues for additional money in those types of areas. I suppose that is an area where it would have an impact, in the absence of a Minister, being able to lobby or win the argument with Executive colleagues for more money for health in certain areas.

Q176 Lady Hermon: You are not able to say that, in the absence of a Health Minister for over a year, there has been a negative impact on patients or nursing staff?

Martin Dillon: At the operational delivery level, we are getting on with what we have and continue to deliver service, with the caveats I have



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said: there are lengthy waiting lists for elective care treatment, waiting lists for domiciliary care.

Lady Hermon: There are indeed.

Martin Dillon: That falls into the overall debate about the level of resources for the health service, which is properly a matter for a Minister.

Q177 **Kate Hoey:** It is hard to get my head around what the difference is between what has been happening because of underfunding and what is happening simply because we don't have a Minister. I would suggest most patients probably don't go into the hospital. When they have had to sit there and wait for a little while, they don't necessarily blame the Minister, as such, or they don't blame the fact they don't have a Minister.

Can I just ask Mr Boyd, you started off by saying you were not here for money, money was not the issue. Why do you think the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action said in their written evidence, "Within the education system, schools are facing huge pressures due to underfunding, which at current levels will result in 400 schools in Northern Ireland being in a budget deficit"? Are they talking about the future or are they talking about now?

Gavin Boyd: No, they are talking about now. I hope what I said was that we simply were not coming along asking for more money. Our position is not simply to give us a shed load more money to do what we are currently doing. Our position is that we should fundamentally review what we are doing. I could not say to you that we don't have enough money to educate 340,000 young people.

Kate Hoey: I was going to ask you that.

Gavin Boyd: What I can say to you is: we don't have enough money to do it the way we are currently doing it.

Q178 **Kate Hoey:** Is there a shortage of teachers in Northern Ireland?

Gavin Boyd: No, there is no shortage of teachers in Northern Ireland. If anything, we have a wonderful teaching workforce. We prepare and train more teachers than we need in Northern Ireland and we export lots of young teachers to the south.

Q179 **Kate Hoey:** I keep meeting them in England. Most of them would like to be coming back.

Gavin Boyd: They are very talented young people and we simply cannot employ them. We have no shortage of good teachers in Northern Ireland.

Q180 **Kate Hoey:** You talked also about having a world-class education system. The reality is that a lot of people in the United Kingdom think Northern Ireland results are very good at one level. Is there a concern that this transformation could end up bringing down to equal up rather than equalling up? Is there a concern among some schools that the very valuable contribution that they make, in terms of results at the higher



level, could be brought down by trying to equalise everything?

Gavin Boyd: What I said was that aspects of our education system are world-class. For example, recently, literacy in our primary schools was ranked very, very highly right across the world, so aspects of our education system are world-class. An awful lot of what we do is very good; some of what we do is not at all good. You will be very familiar with those groups that underperform in our education system. However—and this is the transformation argument—the world is changing rapidly around us. The skillsets that we need are different, looking into the future, from what they were in the past.

At the top end of our education system, we are very good at preparing young people for going on to university. We are very good for preparing young people for the traditional professions, but this community cannot support the number of doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and accountants that it produces. That is why so many of our young people end up across the world outside of our system. Whereas we don't have enough folk in those emerging industries, let's say the pharmaceutical industry or to fill the IT jobs that are burgeoning around Belfast.

There is a question of balance. I suppose this is the argument for transformation. That we should constantly be reviewing what we do and how we do it, and making sure the system is set up to meet the aspirations that we have for our wider society and economy. That is the transformational bit. I am sorry to bore you with coming back to this again. That is the transformational argument.

Q181 **Kate Hoey:** You cannot get on with that at the moment because you don't have the Assembly. How much longer are you prepared to allow it to go on like this, rather than saying, "Please, please, let's have direct rule again"?

Gavin Boyd: From an education perspective—and I want to pick up on what Seamus said earlier—we will have well over 400 schools in deficit this year. The cumulative deficit in those schools will be over £50 million. That means that, looking at schools as a whole, the whole school system will be in deficit.

Q182 **Kate Hoey:** That is to do with Government overall policy?

Gavin Boyd: It is to do with simply the funding going into schools is less than the cost base in schools.

Q183 **Kate Hoey:** That would be happening whether there is an Assembly or not.

Gavin Boyd: That would be happening whether there is an Assembly or not today but what we are saying is, fundamentally, if we don't change the model of delivery, this will persist into the future. That is what we need political oversight for. It is not just a financial issue. This is taking a very real toll on practitioners.



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Q184 **Kate Hoey:** Could this transformation happen under direct rule?

Gavin Boyd: I am looking for political direction.

Q185 **Kate Hoey:** You don't really mind, as long as you get political direction somewhere?

Gavin Boyd: The easy way out for me is political direction, but my argument would be: this fundamentally impacts on our society, our economy, our community and that the people who are in a really good position to make these decisions are politicians.

Q186 **Kate Hoey:** Would that be the same with policing as well?

Anne Connolly: Yes. I want the Policing Board up and running because I think we owe it to the Police Service. Again, I would like to put on record how good I think they are at many things and how noble they are to have come along to meet with us on a regular basis, even though they are not obliged to do so. I think there has been a really good relationship built up there. For me, it is about getting a Policing Board, however that is done, one that people will respect. Just in answer, I should say that at the moment the Policing Board has a high level of public confidence, as it currently stands. That does not mean to say we don't need to review, but getting a Policing Board up and running is what I want from whoever wants to do it. I think it is just essential. We have given you very low levels in some ways, but some very high-level specific examples of why we need to do that.

Q187 **Kate Hoey:** In health, would you like to have a direct Minister appointed specifically to be responsible for Northern Ireland's health?

Martin Dillon: The way I would come at that is this, that is to say the previous Health Minister set out a very ambitious vision for transforming health and social care in Northern Ireland.

Nigel Mills: She was Michelle O'Neill.

Martin Dillon: Yes. In the past year, my role as Chief Executive of the Belfast Trust gives me a seat at the table of a group called the Transformation Implementation Group, which is chaired by the Permanent Secretary, and was tasked by the Minister to oversee implementation of her "Delivering Together" agenda. Over the past year, enormous progress has been made in terms of pre-consultation with the public on various issues, for example, around reconfiguration of stroke services. There have been proposals worked up in detail. There has been lots of groundwork, preparatory work.

Q188 **Kate Hoey:** You are ready to go?

Martin Dillon: We are getting to the point in the next financial year where we will need ministerial clearance to go to a full formal public consultation and, indeed, ministerial decisions on a number of these issues. Again, like previous speakers, it is intuitive that you would want



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local politicians taking local decisions about local service delivery and how services should be reshaped in Northern Ireland.

Q189 **Nigel Mills:** While we are on that, Mr Dillon, I suppose there are lots of things I want that I cannot have as well, but how confident would you be that you could get political agreement and sign-off for some of the more difficult of those decisions?

Martin Dillon: Probably the more difficult decisions would fall into the category where you are consolidating or rationalising hospital services, moving certain services on to a smaller number of sites and so on and so forth. Much hinges, of course, on the compelling argument that clinicians and others can bring forward to that particular debate, so that politicians can then understand the compelling case. Much also hangs then on the nature and tone of the public consultation in relation to these things, so that the public can be persuaded that there is a different way of doing this with better outcomes and it can be done more safely as well. A big part of that will be the way in which we involve the public in terms of co-production and co-design of these changes to the health service.

Q190 **Nigel Mills:** There were some people who used to say that, even when the Executive and the Assembly were in place, they were not able to take big decisions because of political disagreements and the whole way it was structured. Would you have been nervous that you may have had a perfectly sensible plan and it may well have been evidenced as clearly the best way forward but, just because of the way politics here happens, it would never have been allowed to go through?

Martin Dillon: The case for change is compelling and I think it is well-made. For me, given my experience down the years, for you to be able to put a Minister or politicians in a position to make decisions, you need to paint a very clear vision of the future. Rather than say you are downgrading a hospital or removing a service from a hospital or changing its profile, you need to paint the picture or vision of what that hospital will safely do within its competence in the future. Its running profile will change from this to that. That is where the nature of the debate can change dramatically and where we can help politicians in their decision-making, so that it no longer becomes a zero-sum game but a game in which, in order to consolidate or rationalise services, you can still leave some of the smaller hospitals with a clearly-defined function and they can become a centre of excellence for something different than what they currently do. I think that has to play into this in a major way.

Q191 **Nigel Mills:** You almost have me convinced. Were there any decisions that you were waiting to have signed off at ministerial level before the Assembly and the Executive collapsed a year ago? Do you have any experience of long delays waiting for final decisions to be taken or is that not going on?

Martin Dillon: Not that I am aware of, no.

Q192 **Nigel Mills:** Mr Boyd, just on a similar theme, in this need for education



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change, otherwise you are going to run out of money, I presume this has not arisen in the last year, has it? This has been a structural issue for a while, has it?

Gavin Boyd: The problem has been coming for some time. It is a structural issue. The reason that the reduction in real terms of the budget that has been going on for some time only started to bite in the last 18 months or so is because schools were relatively well-funded and were sitting on surpluses in their budgets. They had been consuming the surpluses. It was only during the financial year 2015-16 that the lines crossed. That is that the total expenditure in schools was running at a higher level than the total income coming in from the state.

Q193 **Nigel Mills:** Had you been flagging up to Ministers for a while that, “We need to make these reforms. We can do things better. We can get better outcomes if we make these changes” and it had not been happening, or was this something that you realised once the funding went the wrong way?

Gavin Boyd: No, the issue of the schools estate has been well-known and well-publicised for quite some time. We have had various reports produced, including one by Sir George Bain some years ago, setting out what the sustainable schools indicator should be, what is the appropriate size for a primary school, what is the appropriate size for a post-primary school. However, what has changed most recently is we now have the burning platform, so although it was possible perhaps not to confront the very difficult decisions because we could just move on, I could characterise it by saying that the platform is now well and truly aflame.

Q194 **Nigel Mills:** We all know from our own constituencies that closing any school is not an easy political decision to take. Do you think if the Executive was reconstituted the same as it was just over a year ago that the hard decisions on closing some schools could happen?

Gavin Boyd: The platform is on fire here, but the argument that I want to put forward is that, in many instances, we can provide better educational experiences for our young people, more relevant educational experiences. Let me give you a little bit more detail. Those schools in our system that are under the greatest financial pressure at the minute are small, non-selective post-primary schools. We have some post-11 to 16 schools, some 11 to 19 schools in our system with less than 200 pupils. It is almost—in fact, it is—impossible to provide a wide range of subject choice for those young people, which means that young people don’t necessarily get to study the subjects that they enjoy most. We know that we tend to work harder at the things that we enjoy so, if I like French and I get the chance to study French, the chances are I will do better.

There is a lack of educational experience in some cases, but probably at least as important is the lack of the extracurricular experience that a small school can provide in that small school community. We develop as individuals through all those other experiences. They might be sporting.



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They might be cultural. You might want to be part of a choir. All those other development opportunities will be restricted if we don't have the appropriate size. I was talking to a couple of school principals this morning—

Q195 **Nigel Mills:** I can see you are trying to sell me on the detail of the reform rather than perhaps answering the question, whether you are confident that you will not have rival politicians fighting over which schools get closed and protests on the streets and everyone checking it out.

Gavin Boyd: The argument has to be: it is not about closing a school. It is providing better opportunities for those young people.

Nigel Mills: I know, but that is not always how we politicians play the game, is it? At times we might characterise—

Lady Hermon: Some people like small schools.

Q196 **Chair:** I think the point that is being made is that, while I think we are sold on the idea that lack of Ministers is causing real problems right across Northern Ireland, the reintroduction of politicians isn't necessarily a panacea. Politicians bring with them their own problems for you as officials, who want to make change and have to bend your mind to how to transform a service for the better. Would you have any thoughts on that?

Gavin Boyd: I accept the point. We will always make the case, but this is where political leadership is absolutely needed. We are saying that, for us to deal with some of these issues, we need the political leadership.

Q197 **Nigel Mills:** Ms Connolly, can I just ask: do you have any ideas how the board could be re-jigged to avoid this problem arising if the Executive or the Assembly collapsed again in future, heaven forbid?

Anne Connolly: Ironically, the problems that we hear at the Assembly don't seem to happen in the board. We do generally get consensus, which is the strangest thing, considering it is meant to be more highly political than anything else. That does not mean to say we don't have real debates and real arguments. I have no interest in the political bit of it really. I just want the board to work. I am very content if we get politicians back from Stormont because on the board it worked well. We did have some very tough days. As Chair, it has been at times very difficult to manage; people get very excited. The NCA was one example of something that took ages, but we did get there, because you persevere and you have to make sure that the information is there.

As I said previously, the board model is a good model. Whether you need 19, whether you need 20, 25, who knows, and whether you need 10 MLAs or nine that would not be up to me. As the board has grown and developed, the political stuff is not quite so upfront. We are starting to look at other issues in policing, day-to-day stuff that affects the lives of everyone. There is a need perhaps to look at the skillset there that is



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required. All of the accounting officers in the room will have received an accounting officer letter saying, "Do you have the skills of this, that and the other?"

Q198 **Nigel Mills:** Should we just say there can be, yes, 10 MLAs on but, if they cannot get their act together and appoint any, you can just carry on and discharge all your functions without any politicians, so you are not subject to having a year where you cannot do your job? Or is that just too undemocratic to proceed?

Anne Connolly: Again, that is a political decision.

Q199 **Nigel Mills:** I was asking for your view, though. Do you think that would be a better position, so that your institution is stable?

Anne Connolly: I would prefer not to be in a position where we would have an Assembly up and running and then, six months later, we are back in this position again or some other poor unfortunate who might succeed me. It is not satisfactory for the people who work in policing or indeed the Policing Board. Irrespective of whether it is directed by the Minister, I do accept that the local Ministers have more local knowledge. It is easier for them to be there and it is easy for us to get in touch with them. But whether it is a combination of politicians and civilian people, as it is at the moment, I don't mind as long as it is a model that will work and will not be left to deteriorate, in the absence of an Assembly or people falling out of the Assembly, because that is the situation we are in at the moment.

Q200 **John Grogan:** A few questions, picking up one of the points from Lady Hermon's questioning, on the number of police officers who are so senior that they have to be appointed by a Minister, it was above a certain rank, wasn't it?

Anne Connolly: No, they are appointed by the board.

John Grogan: They are appointed by the board?

Anne Connolly: Yes, but the Minister ratifies the post, in the same way that the Minister would approve other things.

Q201 **John Grogan:** I see, so they have to be appointed by the board. The Minister cannot appoint them without the board?

Anne Connolly: No, the board makes the appointment. That is very clear. That would be for the Chief Constable, the Deputy Chief Constable, Assistant Chief Constables and the directors on the staff side, like finance and human resources.

John Grogan: I see, so three uniformed police officers and then the staff side.

Anne Connolly: It is more than three. It would be about seven or eight, yes.



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Q202 **John Grogan:** None of them have gone in the last year, so you are fortunate that—

Anne Connolly: No, but things are changing. People do ask for other opportunities, like secondment. It is not a satisfactory situation to be in. Again, the tenure of the current Chief Constable and the current Deputy expires next year, in May, so we would need to be thinking now are they going to seek extensions—we need a board to approve that—or do we need to be starting the wheels in motion to recruit, because time flies.

Q203 **John Grogan:** It does. No, so it is very serious. Then on the question of the money running out, basically, the only similarity I can see is with the United States, where they are running of money. To stop that happening, as I understand, you have to get the Executive in quickly in proposing a budget, or you would have to pass legislation through the Commons and the Lords. We are getting very near that point of no return, aren't we? Have you submitted estimates and so on and things to the Northern Ireland Office? Is there someone getting all this together, whether it is the Executive or the Commons?

Anne Connolly: That information will already have been sent through by the Accounting Officer to the Department of Justice, in our case. The other thing we must remember as well—and the reason I used the word "limbo"—is that the Department of Justice is the arm's-length body. We are like the non-Department. There is a reluctance on their part to take over because people would then say, "You are interfering with a non-Department public body", if they exist. This is the difficulty: we don't really know what we are. But those things have gone in, yes.

Q204 **John Grogan:** Can I ask you, similarly in terms of education, I presume there is a draft budget somewhere floating around, is there?

Martin Dillon: The Department of Finance have issued a budget briefing pack at the moment, yes.

Q205 **John Grogan:** I see. Can I just ask, this extra £1 billion as well and so on, I think some has gone into health and education this year, £50 million, is that right?

Gavin Boyd: Martin can perhaps correct me, but my understanding is that about £30 million has been drawn out of the £50 million this year. That is not my territory, but I suspect about £10 million of that has been drawn by education and £20 million by health.

Q206 **John Grogan:** I see. Have the police had any of it?

Anne Connolly: No, we don't have, but we are waiting patiently for the money for HIU, the Historical Inquiries Unit, to do with the legacy issues, because we have just been talking to the Chief Constable. It is rather urgent, because the Police Service currently is funding it from their own funds and I think he said it is around £25 million out of his current budget will have to go this year to fund the legacy stuff. There is money there, so it would be nice to have.



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Q207 **John Grogan:** Would all three—police, education and health—hope for some more of this £1 billion once the Executive has—

Anne Connolly: I will take Mr Boyd's money if he does not want it.

Q208 **John Grogan:** You would all have a hope, would you?

Anne Connolly: Yes.

Q209 **John Grogan:** Do you know how much you might get?

Anne Connolly: No, we don't get anything from that, but we have access to security funding.

Gavin Boyd: I think I did say earlier, on the basis of the Department of Finance briefing document, the Department of Education is suggesting that there would be a £134 million shortfall in the education budget for next year. It would be awfully nice if it was made up from somewhere.

Q210 **John Grogan:** I see, so you have hopes. Equally, in health, would you have hopes for the £1 billion?

Martin Dillon: Very much so. Apart from the £50 million over two years for it towards existing pressures, we hope health will be allocated £100 million in the next two financial years as well as £10 million over five years for mental health services. Through the Department of Health, the Health Board and clusters, health has put considerable effort into working up proposals to spend that money on the transformation agenda. I know that many of those proposals are almost ready to go, should the money start to flow.

Q211 **John Grogan:** Time has gone quickly, so one final question. Is it a function of a politician that is beneficial? As the Chair, not everything a politician does is beneficial but is there one thing that is beneficial? When you are trying to draw attention to something good or start a debate in the field of policing, education or health, it helps to have a politician along to cut the ribbon or make a speech on the subject or chair a meeting, does it?

Anne Connolly: We don't give them as easy a job as to cut a ribbon.

John Grogan: I am sure, yes.

Anne Connolly: But it does help the Policing Board, because they are tuned into the difficulties and they are part of the debate from day one, the committee's write-up, and it can happen. Of course, I think it does add a little bit of gravity to the board because the feeling was in the past that the Policing Authority did not quite have the same high public profile and did not have the same respect from the public. I think it has helped. It also helps that, when there is a debate in the Assembly, they have already had it. That is probably why it is easier, because we have spent more time.



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Gavin Boyd: From my perspective, some of the things that I have been saying publicly over the last three or four months on behalf of the Education Authority would have been said by the Minister, would have been said by a politician. They are the territory of a politician rather than somebody running an arm's length delivery organisation. The issues are so important that we have to articulate them, but we would look to the Minister to do that.

Martin Dillon: In my role, where I find politicians particularly invaluable is bringing pieces of local intelligence, what is happening on the ground in their constituencies in relation to substance abuse, alcohol abuse and issues like that, where they can give me insights that I otherwise would not have. I can then work with them to tackle a particular crisis or tailor a service in a different way. I find them particularly invaluable in that space.

Q212 **Lady Hermon:** Just a curiosity on my part. In fact, we have been in similar circumstances before, in October 2002, when the Assembly was suspended. We had five years of direct rule until May 2007 and the sun, the moon and the stars did not fall in. Do you have a clear preference? If we cannot get the Executive up and running again—and a bit of generosity of spirit, which was mentioned by witnesses in the previous session, is shown between the parties—and we go back to direct rule, would it be your preference, if we don't do the direct rule, that we just get our Assembly up and running again? Do you have a clear preference, bearing in mind that in five years we have direct rule, which seemed to work perfectly well?

Anne Connolly: As I have said before, my main thing is I want the Policing Board up and running. The difference between me and certainly Gavin's organisation is that he does not have politicians on it. We do. If we don't have a local Assembly, then it is up to the Secretary of State to determine who she puts on and how she does that. The provision that was in the 2000 Policing Act for just nominating, asking parties, has been repealed by the St Andrew's Agreement, so there would have to be a change in legislation anyway.

Q213 **Lady Hermon:** We are not comparing like with like?

Anne Connolly: We are not comparing like with like.

Amanda Stewart: I think the opportunity that potentially would be lost is the programme for Government, in the sense that, if we move to that situation, we would get a Policing Board. The bits that we have talked about today, in terms of health and education, around the transformation, is also a transformation of policing in terms of budgets and the need for all of those organisations to work closer together, because obviously there is an impact in terms of health and people sitting in A&E for policing. Without a local Assembly, the opportunities that are in the draft programme for Government that the previous Executive had will not be realised in a sense.



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Lady Hermon: That is very interesting.

Gavin Boyd: One slight correction: we do have eight political nominees on our board. The legislation—

Q214 **Lady Hermon:** Not politicians?

Gavin Boyd: They are political nominees and they may or may not be politicians, but we have not had any serving MLAs on the board. The legislation says that the political nominees will be made by the First and Deputy First Minister using the default mechanism. Somehow the Civil Service managed to find a way to fill the eight posts on our board after the last election, which is a great tribute to the work that senior civil servants do in these circumstances.

The difference I put to you, Lady Sylvia—between now and that area in 2002 to 2007—is the education system was very well-funded at that time. Schools were sitting with considerable resources and, therefore, the issues that we are trying to deal with today simply did not exist to the same extent, but we were still losing an opportunity. I put to you that if a system is not moving forwards it is moving backwards. There is no such thing as standing still and, if we are not constantly looking, constantly seeing a vision for the future and constantly changing that, then we are regressing. It was hidden by the funding in the system.

Lady Hermon: That is very helpful.

Martin Dillon: As I said, in health we need to significantly transform our service and care models. My personal preference would be for local politicians taking local decisions about local services.

Lady Hermon: That is very unanimous. That is very helpful for the inquiry we are doing. Thank you for that.

Q215 **Chair:** One last question in relation to the Policing Board. You mentioned this morning you had an informal meeting that was helpful, although of course, under statute as it currently exists, it was informal and could take no decisions. That situation, as you rightly referred to, Anne, was brought in by the St Andrew's Agreement. One possibility, thinking about our recommendations about future-proofing things in relation to governance in Northern Ireland, might be that we could change the current arrangements, with respect to the composition of the Policing Board and the way in which the political members are appointed. Do you think there might be some mileage in that, appetite for that? Do you think that is a runner or not?

Anne Connolly: I am not sure how the politicians would view that. I am trying to be diplomatic here. I think some of the politicians would not want that. It might be too soon, although I think after 15, 18 years we do need to start to think about it. In the Republic, they have a full authority, which is civic membership. I would have to say that, when the Assembly stood down last year, we had a really good board and we had politicians, very high-level local politicians—and well-regarded in their parties—who



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worked well together. That disappointed me when that happened. I am happy enough to have the politicians and the local politicians, but I would also be open to other models. Personally, I don't know that that would be viewed—

Q216 **Chair:** I take your point about having MLAs in your work, of adding gravity. That is music to the ears of a politician because very often we are accused of not adding gravity.

Anne Connolly: Oh, you do.

Chair: Mr Boyd made the point that his board is made up of political nominees, but they are not MLAs. Do you think your board, trying to think about how to make it more robust in the future, might be—

Anne Connolly: There is any number of options, which is not for me, it is for the Department or the Secretary of State, but there are numerous options. My plea is simply that, if we get an Assembly back and it is 10 MLAs, then we are back again at the mercy of the Assembly. That is my only worry. If the Assembly is up and running, then it works very well, but the way it is at the minute, then every time this happens we are back into that limbo situation.

Q217 **Lady Hermon:** Yes, you need continuity in policing we are talking about.

Anne Connolly: Yes, we do need continuity.

Chair: Absolutely. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much indeed. You have certainly added to our insight into this matter and what you have said most definitely will be reflected in the report we write. Thank you.