

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Funding priorities in the 2018-19 budget: Education](#), HC 1497

Wednesday 10 October 2018

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Members present: Dr Andrew Murrison (Chair); John Grogan; Mr Stephen Hepburn; Lady Hermon; Nigel Mills; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart.

Questions 1 - 90

Witnesses

I: Sharon O'Connor, Chairperson, John Collings, Director of Education, and Joyce Bill, Director of Finance and ICT, Education Authority.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Education Authority (EDU0044)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sharon O'Connor, John Collings and Joyce Bill.

Q1 Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for coming to inform our deliberations today. You are very welcome. I wonder, Sharon, if you might like to start by simply introducing your team and say where you think you are with this. We have noted your written evidence, for which many thanks, and we look forward to asking a few questions on the basis of that statement. Before doing so, it would be helpful if you could introduce yourselves.

Sharon O'Connor: Thank you very much, Chair. On my right is John Collings, who is our acting chief executive and erstwhile director of education, who will be helping me with a lot of the precision around the educational matters. To my left is Joyce Bill, who is our director of Finance and ICT.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. I have a question to start off with and it is to do with money, noting your concerns expressed in the written evidence about the awful prefabs, for example, which seem to be totemic for all of us who represent constituencies, and they are sadly still there, still accommodating students and teachers, and Northern Ireland is no exception to that. Clearly, to replace those there is a need to find some capital funding, quite substantial capital funding, yet we find for the Department of Education for the last financial year a 5.9% underspend—that is £136.1 million—against the spring supplementary estimates for that year. It appears that non-departmental public bodies have not drawn down on that money, and my question to you is whether you were aware of that since those funds were available for capital expenditure in particular.

Sharon O'Connor: With your indulgence, could I start off by giving you a little bit of contextual information about where we are, and I will move to the financial situation as I go? First, we are a relatively young organisation. We were established in April 2015 and we were part of the reform of public administration. Five organisations merged to make this very large regional organisation. For the first year, it was about putting the organisation together and getting our senior team into place and doing all of that building process. By year 2, we began to realise that there were very significant financial challenges and the need and the cost of the services was growing at quite an exponential rate.

The organisation decided to develop a vision and we have a very strong vision, which is about trying to inspire, support and challenge all of our children and young people to be the very best that they can be. We have continued to make improvements in the services. We have invested along the way in terms of that process of transformation.

Where we are now is we have a board that is representative of the complex architecture of education in Northern Ireland. Our board is 20



HOUSE OF COMMONS

strong and has members who come from all of the educational components in Northern Ireland, as well as political representatives. The board itself, you will be pleased to know, has operated with great unity of purpose. They are an extremely dedicated board and have made great strides in trying to deal with the financial challenges that we face.

We also work extensively with a very wide range of stakeholders in the region, which would include organisations like the controlled schools body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, so we have a wide range of groups who are interested in what we do.

At the outset, I would also like to record with the Committee that we are a very large organisation within the region in which we operate. We are critical to the Northern Ireland economy. We employ 39,000 staff. We have over 1,100 schools that we are responsible for delivering services to; 350,000 children rely on us and we have 120,000 children who are involved in our youth education work.

We have tackled the issues of the fundamental challenges that we have experienced in terms of the budget. The costs of our services are increasing all the time and our budget has remained relatively flat in the last number of years. Joyce will deal with some of the specifics in terms of what we have done to deal with that. Where we are at now is we recognise that in order to change we need to radically transform the education system, but we are a service delivery organisation. We operate under the direction of a Minister and a Department and we are trying to do what we can to improve services and to be as efficient as we can in terms of the funds. I can tell you that within the last couple of years we have constantly made bids for additional funds to help us deliver on the programmes that we have and we have continued to deliver excellent new school buildings and improvements in our estate.

I can sum up by saying that the situation as we stand today is that in order to transform we need investment to manage that programme while we deliver the business as usual activities. We would also benefit from capital investment to build schools that are in the right places and doing the right sorts of things. So, that is where we are.

In terms of an underspend, we have made all efforts to obtain any additional funds that we can to manage our services. It has proved to be quite difficult and we are currently working with all of the school leaders and chairs of boards of governors of the schools to try to see how we can work together to be as efficient as we can in the delivery of education services. The schools and the organisation I think have really strained to try to deliver efficiency within the education system and we have been relatively successful in that regard. Essentially, to sum up, our platform is yes, we are unable to live within the budget that we have and we do need additional investment.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q3 **Chair:** But, you see, that is difficult to sustain given that there is a nearly 6% underspend for the last financial year. I am worried about that. It may very well be that the Department of Education does not feel that it can commit to those funds and is being overly cautious because of the lack of a Minister, but I am trying to bottom out why it is that there is such a significant underspend given what you have represented is a considerable need.

Sharon O'Connor: As the organisation delivering the services on the scale that I have described, I can tell you that we are not underspending on our budgetary allocation. If anything, we are going the other way and we are constantly seeking additional support for the overspends that we are currently trying to manage.

Q4 **Chair:** Can I then ask you whether you were aware of that underspend at departmental level?

Sharon O'Connor: I think we are all generally aware that there are areas of underspend in regional budgets for all sorts of reasons. Specifically, was I aware that there was an underspend in the Department? No, I was not aware of this. Joyce or John, do you want to add anything to that?

Joyce Bill: What I would say is that, as Sharon has highlighted, we have spent our allocations and we as an Education Authority on our recurrent budget are sitting with a slight overspend in 2017-18. We have a slight overspend in 2016-17. What I would say to put that into context is even though we have an overspend in 2016-17 the reality was that we spent £19 million less than we did in the previous year.

In respect of the capital allocations that we get, we have a very small underspend on our capital allocations. In fact, it is below 1%, so I was not aware of the level of underspend that had occurred. Sometimes what happens is that these underspends come out when budgets are finalised and outturns are finalised at the end of the year. The monitoring around process such as it operates means that we have to put in our last bids for additional funding in-year round about November or December, so there is a bit of a timeframe between when we put in the bids and when the final outturns occur.

Q5 **Chair:** Yes, but this is the last financial year so that process should have happened already—

Joyce Bill: The process did happen.

Chair: And £136 million provides a lot of proper classrooms to replace your prefabs.

Joyce Bill: It does but we, as I say, have spent the budget that we were given. If there had been any additional money that had been given to us in the year, we would have done our best to spend it, but we certainly do not have that level of underspend in terms of our capital budget.



Q6 Chair: What will your recommendation be to this Committee, then, noting that underspend, in crafting our report to try to prise the sticky fingers of the Department of Education from this very substantial underspend in order to get you the capital spend that you require?

Sharon O'Connor: If we have a case to make, it is that we are telling you that we have insufficient funds to run the system as it is currently configured. We are telling you that it will take a deal of time to manage the transformation programme that is required to adjust our service delivery, and we are saying that if there are additional funds to be had we absolutely need them. Further, we are saying that we would like to see capital investment to develop a school estate that is fit for purpose and meets the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

John Collings: I think that is the key point I would make as well, Chair. Any transformation of the education system or education sector in Northern Ireland is multipronged and one of those prongs has to be a capital investment programme. That is the key message that I would want to give.

Q7 Chair: Would you characterise that as being spend to save? It is certainly a characteristic of education in Northern Ireland that there are a lot of very small schools and in some cases—I can say as a Member of Parliament for a rural area I know this full well—that is for good reason. Rural communities require accessible schools, but in other cases that may not necessarily be the case. There is a need, and you have hinted at that, to look afresh at the footprint of education in Northern Ireland and that implies some upfront spending but long-term savings. Would that be your view or not?

John Collings: It would be. I think that it is a fair summary of our position, Chair. The key thing is that the change to the pattern of provision that could take place over the next few years and into the longer term is not only driven by wanting to deliver a system that is more cost effective and efficient; it is driven by the need to continue to improve standards of achievement and attainment. We know that the best quality teaching and learning takes place when the environment in which children learn is fit for purpose. One of the key priorities for us going forward is a capital investment programme that delivers the kind of teaching and learning environments that are going to deliver those standards.

Q8 Chair: Yes. Unfortunately, change always brings people who perceive themselves to be winners and losers, and we all as constituency MPs know full well that closing schools has a very heavy price to pay very often. Our mailbags certainly reflect that. We are talking about a very political area of public policy. To what extent is the absence of Ministers and the Executive at Stormont holding your plans and aspirations below the waterline at the moment since none of those decisions would be appropriate for officials to take?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Collings: That is right. The Minister of the day has to make every decision on what we refer to as development proposals that will change the shape of provision across the Province. Those decisions are not being made at this point in time.

The other point I would make is that the process that we have in Northern Ireland for taking communities, school leaders and governing bodies with us in terms of changing the shape and pattern of provision is a long process and can take up to 40 or 50 weeks in order to progress. A similar process in the English system, for example, would take maybe 12 to 14 weeks, and that is one of the things that we would want to look at going forward. One of the pressures we face on the ground in having conversations with school leaders, governors and local communities about the pattern of provision in their local areas is the length of time it takes for change to occur and whether we can deliver the capital investment alongside that. I can have a very different kind of conversation with governors, local community leaders, local politicians and school leaders if we are talking about change that is accompanied by a significant amount of capital investment in a new school in a new area, which sustains the local community engagement, rather than a school potentially going on a waiting list, which is going to be five to 10 years.

Joyce Bill: Not only are we facing capital pressures there; we also have a significant maintenance backlog, which is impacting on the fabric of the estate that we have. We have estimated that that maintenance backlog is somewhere in the region of around about £360 million.

Sharon O'Connor: Just to emphasise, because of our size we have a considerable impact on the local construction economy as well.

Q9 **Chair:** You mention size. I think the size is quite extraordinary. You are larger than, for example, the Royal Navy in terms of your staff.

Sharon O'Connor: Yes, we are.

Chair: Not very much larger but larger nevertheless.

Sharon O'Connor: We do not have the fancy titles.

Chair: Sadly not, that is very true.

Q10 **Jim Shannon:** That is quite an analogy to be compared to the Royal Navy.

Sharon O'Connor: A battleship.

Q11 **Jim Shannon:** Yes. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming along to the Committee. Just for the record, I am on the board of governors at Glashury College, so I have had interaction with at least two of the three who are here in relation to that. I want to put that on the record early on so that that can be recorded.

You will also know that my mailbag to your chief executive is pretty phenomenal. He tells me it is one of the largest. There would not be a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

week I would not write to him about something, that is a fact, and that is because of the problems that we have in education, Mr Chairman, as you have rightly outlined.

I have a number of questions and I do not want to labour the meeting and go on, but if ever there was a critical issue it is school budgets. I know that from being on the board of governors of Glashury College because I know what we are doing. It is the uncertainty. The real issue is the uncertainty when it comes to balancing the books, and we are tasked as a board of governors to balance those books and work within a budget, which we do, by the way, in Glashury I am glad to say, but I know other schools are having tremendous difficulties doing that. I want to ask you first in relation to school budgets what advice you give to those schools who are struggling, and I mean really struggling. The choice for some of the schools is simple: it is pay a teacher off, increase your classes as a result and try to massage your school in such a way.

Sorry, before I started I should have said—my apologies for not doing it—that the education results in Northern Ireland were exceptional this year. We must put that on record as well, Mr Chairman. Our results were the highest for almost all schools, if not all schools, across Northern Ireland that they have been for years, and that in a way is down to what you do, what the teachers do and the ability of the pupils as well. I just want to have that on record, but on school budgets, please.

Sharon O'Connor: Before I bring Joyce in to talk about the specifics of how we are working with schools, we have worked very intensively with school leaders. Ninety-nine per cent of our budget goes directly to schools. Schools are straining every sinew to try to live within their budgets and we recognise that because the process relies on people, once you have cut out all the available and immediate savings, you are left with losing people and that has a direct impact on the quality of education. Our finance team is working very dedicatedly with staff to try to help the schools.

John Collings: Just before Joyce comes in, to put that in context, since 2011, like many other authorities, the spending power of the education budget has gone down by £233 million. The inevitable consequence of that is where we find ourselves today, which is in a very difficult situation. We are seeing more and more schools getting into financial difficulty, which is why we are in our submission making the case for investment now as well as into the future into school budgets.

One of the key issues for me is that, to pick up the point that Jim made, standards have continued to improve in the Northern Ireland system in spite of those pressures. Schools have worked tremendously hard—teachers and school leaders—to produce the results that they are producing in very difficult circumstances, but we have reached a point now where the size of that cake is much less than it was in 2010-11. Therefore, we are getting into some very difficult situations.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

One of the things we are saying to school leaders, in direct response to Jim's question, is sometimes you can only do what you can do and sometimes enough is enough. It would be inappropriate, for example, to be challenging a school so hard that they had no other choice than to increase class sizes to 35 or 40 or beyond 40. That is not acceptable and we would not ask schools to do that. We are representing schools with the Department when those situations emerge.

Sharon O'Connor: Chair, I will ask Joyce to talk specifically about what we are doing with schools.

Joyce Bill: Just to put this in context, as Sharon has said, 99% of our overall budget goes directly into schools or services that directly support schools, children and young people. The position has been that we have recognised the real challenges that our schools are facing and our school leaders are telling us that the reality is that they are under significant pressure and significant strain trying to balance reducing budgets with the drive to produce increasing educational outcomes and also the impact of special and additional needs, which are a rising challenge for our schools and for all of us to deal with.

In terms of where we are, what we have done this year is we have implemented a new approach to financial planning with schools. We have effectively looked at schools and categorised those who are most financially at risk so that we can direct our support to those schools. We have engaged in a number of face-to-face meetings. Before we kicked off the process this year, we did 11 engagement events throughout Northern Ireland where we met with around about 650 governors and school leaders to set out how we were going to do the process. We have met face to face with around about 900 schools. We have worked with them to look at options where they can potentially reduce cost, bringing in information about similar families of schools, also working through our colleagues in our education directorate and our colleagues in our HR directorate and our colleagues in our operations and estates directorate.

We have also, very importantly, used the financial planning process this year as a health check with schools. We have been very keen to take the views of school leaders and boards of governors around what they are finding in their schools, what the challenges are, what the potential actions are, what some of the solutions are and what the things are that we need to do. We have fed that information back to the Department of Education.

What we have found through this financial planning process is that based on the information that we have available to us at this time schools are estimating that they will overspend their common funding formula allocations by around about £32 million to £33 million. Importantly, that is after schools have identified just under £11 million of additional income and savings. Our schools are doing everything they can do, but it is very clear to us, as John has illustrated, that many of our schools simply



HOUSE OF COMMONS

cannot take any further action to reduce their costs. It is very pertinent given that in a lot of cases 80% or in some cases 90% or more of a school's budget is actually on staff, so there are limits to what they can do. There are limits to increasing class sizes. There are limits with the number of composite classes and the number of classes that you can put together in a composite class.

We have been very clear with our school leaders that we believe that there is absolutely a need for additional funding and support for our schools so that they can continue to deliver the excellent outcomes and improvements and so that they can continue to work on those areas where there is more to do because we know that there are attainment gaps. What we will continue to do is we will continue to work with our schools and with our school leaders as we move through the year in terms of helping them manage their finances and engaging with them to understand the challenges that they have.

Q12 Jim Shannon: I think that it is obvious, Mr Chairman, that the education system is on the verge of crisis. I am not exaggerating with that word. Everyone is working extremely hard to deliver the educational attainment, which this year has been exceptional, by the way, and at the same time work within a budget. Under the confidence and supply motion that the Democratic Unionist Party has with the Conservative Party, we have managed to agree moneys to go into Northern Ireland. According to the figures we have, some £41.5 million-worth of that has been earmarked for education so far with more to come.

I am interested in the figures, Joyce, that you gave earlier on. I am heartened, by the way, by the figures that you mentioned and how you are working within the budget. One of the things that seems never to increase—this is my second question, Mr Chairman—is about new build; in other words, capital spend.

Again, I put forward an example. A number of schools in my constituency are waiting for new builds, and then we also have changing trends. I think it is important that we acknowledge things. If you go back five or six years—again, because I have knowledge of it, I can speak with some authority in relation to it—in my area primary school numbers were low or lowish, which meant that you were looking to some changes to primary schools and whether we could keep them all open. Now that has changed. There has been an increase in the population, people moving in and an increase in new children and new babies, and the trend for the next six years is that some of the primary schools will be bursting in trying to give places. That also then has an impact upon the secondary education.

It is very important that we have a strategy in place. Can I say something really gently to you? I am not so sure that I see that strategy. It is probably your remit, John, to be fair to you. We need to have a strategy in place that takes into consideration the trends for population, the growth that in my area will be 1,000 new houses, which they are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

building now, and at least a third of that will be families with children. We need to have primary schools and secondary education. I know we have a new strategy in relation to some new builds, but we do not really ever see the capital increasing. If the capital does not increase, then the new builds are going to be very difficult to achieve.

Chair: I would encourage our guests to be as brief as they possibly can with their answers so that we can get through all of the questions.

John Collings: Understood, Chair. To reassure Jim, the Education Authority published the first regional strategic area plan in 2017. The Minister of the day, Peter Weir, approved that a year or so ago now, and we are into the second year of that strategic plan. It does try to take account of the trends over time that you were referring to there, Jim, and to paint a longer-term picture for each local government district. Because it is aligned to each local government district, it is important to build an area planning strategy around a community planning strategy for Northern Ireland as well. That template is there; that framework is there.

The bottom line is that the challenge is getting the right number of schools in the right places of the right type. We know that in some parts of the Province we do not have enough school places and, therefore, we are talking about expansion and change, sometimes quite dramatic change, and in other places we are not. I want to reassure you that there is a strategic plan. We are working through that. The next iteration of that will be coming forward in the next 18 months to two years.

As to the point you make about a capital investment programme, I think what is missing at the moment is the capital investment programme sitting alongside that strategic area plan, and that is one of the messages I would want to give to the Committee around transformation for the future. It is about having a capital investment programme sitting alongside a strategic area planning programme.

Q13 **Chair:** I think that we are going to have to go back to the Department of Education, aren't we, to ask about this underspend? From the figures you have been giving us this morning already, this particular underspend would address quite a few of the issues that you have raised with us.

John Collings: That is an appropriate question for the Department, yes, Chair.

Joyce Bill: Importantly, it is not just about an underspend in this year; it is about continued and sustained investment over a period of years. This is a challenge that will take a number of years to address, but it is an important challenge that we do tackle.

Sharon O'Connor: Chair, I might just briefly add that we are continuing to build fantastic new schools and I would invite the Committee to come and see some of those. We will spend money if it is available to us and at this point we do not have sufficient funds to fulfil the ambition that we have created for the local community.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jim Shannon: The reason why I asked the question, Mr Chairman—I am very conscious of your direction so I will make it short and sweet—is that, for example, Glastry College had £3 million and bought land, but there is no project in at least the next 10 years for a new build. One of the options that has been raised is a Movilla and Glastry amalgamation, if I can use that. Again, we need to have not an 18-month decision and then 10 years waiting on a build. That does not address the issue of the population trends now. I just make that point.

The last question I want to ask, and I will ask two together, is about ensuring that the repairs are done. If you are not able to build new builds in the timescale that has been given, then the repairs to the schools are very important. That is number one. I will amalgamate these two questions together.

On the issue of nurseries within primary schools, I would encourage the Education Authority to do that and to give the help and support that is needed in primary schools. My three boys went through nursery. They are young men now, but I am just saying the opportunity from nursery schools to primary schools is incredible for how it educates and how it builds character, personality and friendships. I just want to encourage the Education Authority to do what they can in all the primary schools that there are to ensure that there is nursery provision there as well.

Chair: That is a point very well made but I am not going to invite you to address it directly. I am going to move on to Lady Hermon because we are short on time.

Q14 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you very much for coming to give us evidence this morning. It is very good of you. A number of issues arise from the evidence that you have already given. I will start by asking—because I think it would be very helpful—if you could describe the relationship between the Education Authority, which is a new body as you have explained, Sharon, and the Department of Education, which is not a new body. What is the relationship like?

Sharon O'Connor: The Department of Education is our sponsor organisation. Essentially, the Department reserves all of the responsibilities of policy development and development of legislation where it is appropriate, and from them we get our direction in terms of what we are expected to deliver on, whether that be an area planning strategy or capital build programmes. We act as a service organisation on behalf of the Department, which is the policy maker in education.

Q15 **Lady Hermon:** Are you accountable? Is the Education Authority accountable to the Permanent Secretary for Education?

Sharon O'Connor: Yes.

Q16 **Lady Hermon:** That is very interesting. Do you mind me asking—you do not have to answer this question—is your post as the chairperson of the Education Authority a paid post?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sharon O'Connor: Yes. I am a political appointee. The rest of the board are nominated, but I was appointed via public competition by the Minister of the day.

Q17 **Lady Hermon:** I do not particularly want to know what you are paid, but how does your salary compare with a principal of a school who has the huge responsibility of running a school? Is it higher?

Sharon O'Connor: No, it wouldn't be. I fulfil a part-time role. I should say we also have a chief executive role, and I will take this opportunity to say we have just started the competition for the permanent appointment of a new chief executive. That salary would be significantly higher than most of the very large schools in the region, I would think, but I would again go back to the fact that we have a £1.9 billion budget and 39,000 staff. We are delivering services to the entirety of the education system within the region, so that would be a difference in scale.

We work very, very closely, obviously, with school leaders. It is a partnership and it is an improving partnership. There is a sense that we all face these financial challenges together, and I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of school leaders who have done everything they possibly can to cope with this difficult situation.

Q18 **Lady Hermon:** Absolutely, I do agree with that. Can I just come back to the relationship between the Education Authority and the Department of Education? You have described the relationship between the Education Authority and leaders of schools and teachers and boards of governors, which is a very good one. Would you describe the relationship with the Department of Education as a good working relationship? Is that a close working relationship?

Sharon O'Connor: Yes, I would describe it as a good working relationship. Again, the Department and ourselves are very much on the same page in terms of the financial challenges that we face. I think it took us all a deal of time to get mastery of the practical and financial realities of this new organisation—the practical realities of trying to transform education—but I think you would find that the Department and ourselves are very much on the same page in terms of the challenges and potentially the solutions, too.

Q19 **Lady Hermon:** How often would you meet with the Permanent Secretary?

Sharon O'Connor: I meet him quite frequently and we formally have a governance and accountability review quarterly.

Q20 **Lady Hermon:** Does "quite frequently" translate into once a week or once a fortnight?

Sharon O'Connor: It would be maybe twice a month.

John Collings: I, as acting chief executive, would have a more regular meeting with the Permanent Secretary and the Deputy Permanent



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Secretaries, and our officers at different levels in the organisation have day-to-day contact and meetings with other officials from the Department in the policy areas that we are taking forward.

- Q21 **Lady Hermon:** You will be aware, I am sure, that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced at the beginning of September that there would be legislation brought forward in this House—and it will be soon—to increase or certainly to clarify the powers of the Permanent Secretaries right across the Departments in Northern Ireland in the continuing, sadly, absence of a functioning Assembly. If you had a wish list, what would you wish the Permanent Secretary for Education to give priority to?

Sharon O'Connor: I think the transformation programme that the Department has taken the lead on, and we are working very much in support of them in terms of transformation.

- Q22 **Lady Hermon:** Absolutely. Could I just make sure that, in fact, John, you said in response to my colleague Jim that there has been an agreed strategic plan for transformation?

John Collings: That is right.

- Q23 **Lady Hermon:** It was agreed in 2017. It was agreed by the then Minister, was it?

John Collings: There was a strategic area plan, so this was area planning. Area planning would only be part of a much wider transformation agenda. That was just one piece of strategy, if you like, that takes forward the Education Authority's responsibilities around delivering on something called the sustainable schools policy. The Department sets the sustainable schools policy. We are required to take that forward through a strategic area plan.

- Q24 **Lady Hermon:** Is that the top priority that you would wish the Permanent Secretary—

Sharon O'Connor: I think we have all agreed and certainly the Permanent Secretary would agree that we need to pick up the pace in terms of managing these processes. We need to adequately resource them and, as John has earlier said, we need to incentivise the community to see the positive in a sustainable schools policy and in area planning that makes sure that we have good community schools that have the full range of educational requirements that that community needs. Those are priorities for us.

John Collings: I think that there are two very important things sitting on a desk, and one is Northern Ireland's programme for government, which has not yet got its green light. That is going to be important to take forward because it sets the context. There is an outcome in that programme for government that is about giving every child the best start in life. That is the context within which we have to operate.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Secondly, there is a children and young people strategy that is still in draft form, and it needs to be taken forward. It needs to be driven forward. It influences what we do on a day-to-day basis, and we have to work within that context.

What we are doing is working as best as we possibly can in the current situation, knowing that those things are being readied to take forward in a big way. The transformation of the sector or the system, of which area planning is only one part, is something that I would hope that the Permanent Secretary would be able to drive forward.

Q25 Lady Hermon: Are these conversations that you are already having in anticipation of the legislation being passed?

Sharon O'Connor: Yes.

John Collings: Yes, it is.

Q26 Lady Hermon: Fantastic. You are all nodding your heads unanimously. That is very encouraging. One of the other issues that came up is of the 39,000 members of staff for which you are responsible, the majority of those are?

Sharon O'Connor: It is a mix but the majority would probably be people involved with the delivery of education in schools.

John Collings: Classroom assistants and teachers.

Sharon O'Connor: Bus drivers and all of the people who deliver the package.

John Collings: School meal staff.

Q27 Lady Hermon: It is teachers, it is classroom assistants?

Sharon O'Connor: Yes.

John Collings: Mostly people who work in schools and with children, yes.

Q28 Lady Hermon: I needed you to confirm that because the next question is: how would you describe morale among the teaching staff given the pressures on the budgets that my colleague has outlined and no end in sight to those pressures? How would you describe morale?

Sharon O'Connor: We are working very closely with school leaders in particular, who are under tremendous strain and pressure. We recognise that. We have invested a lot of time in talking to them about what we can do in the reality of the situation that we jointly face. There is a real shared sense of purpose and endeavour around facing these difficulties. We recognise the stress and strain. We have recently been running wellbeing conferences for school leaders, who are very beleaguered in terms of trying to deliver almost impossible financial budgets.

Q29 Lady Hermon: Sorry to interrupt you, Sharon. What about pay rises?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wouldn't pay rises improve morale and send a signal that, in fact, teachers and support staff and bus drivers, all of them are worthy of a pay increase? Is that not a priority? When the Permanent Secretary gets his additional powers, is that not one of the priorities as well as transformation?

Sharon O'Connor: I am going to let John answer that because he is directly involved.

John Collings: I am happy to answer that question. I am chair of the management side negotiating committee that is working with the union leadership locally to bring an end to the industrial action that has been in our system for a number of years and to settle a 2017-18 pay claim. We have taken the position, and I think quite rightly, that teachers do need a fair pay rise.

Q30 **Lady Hermon:** Is that a yes, they are going to get a pay rise?

John Collings: It is not a yes that they are going to get a pay rise. We have accrued some funding to pay a teachers' pay rise of 1% for last year, but what we would seek to do is to look to see whether we could achieve more than that. However—or "and"—that has to go with an end to industrial action in schools, and that is the discussion we are having at the moment with our colleagues in the trade unions.

Q31 **Lady Hermon:** Just let's revise. You would accept that a pay rise would be at least 1% but you would like it to be higher than 1%, is that the case?

John Collings: The public sector pay policy in Northern Ireland—Joyce will correct me if I am wrong—is 1% and we cannot go beyond that without approval.

Q32 **Lady Hermon:** I thought the days of austerity were over.

Sharon O'Connor: I wish they were.

Q33 **Lady Hermon:** I thought we were told at the Tory Party conference last week that the days of austerity were over.

John Collings: The public sector pay policy for Northern Ireland remains at 1%. If whatever happens next week changes that, changes the ability of—

Q34 **Lady Hermon:** When you say next week, what are you anticipating next week?

John Collings: You were telling me that something was going to happen next week.

Q35 **Lady Hermon:** The legislation?

John Collings: I don't know.

Lady Hermon: I was not sure that it was going to be next week. I said



HOUSE OF COMMONS

very soon.

John Collings: I beg your pardon.

Lady Hermon: No, it is fine.

Sharon O'Connor: We would like to see the dispute settled. We would like to treat and respect teachers as appropriate.

Q36 **Lady Hermon:** With a pay rise?

Sharon O'Connor: We do not have the ability to action that as an organisation. That is about a wider range of inputs from others.

Q37 **Lady Hermon:** Could we just have confirmation it will be a priority when the Permanent Secretary's powers are—

Sharon O'Connor: I cannot speak for the Permanent Secretary but it is certainly a priority that we are continuing to communicate to the Department and that is our position.

Lady Hermon: It is a priority, okay.

John Collings: The Department is actively engaged with us in seeking and getting a resolution to the current industrial action and that includes a pay rise, which settles the 2017-18—

Q38 **Chair:** At the moment that would be impossible since there are no Ministers and under current powers it would clearly not be appropriate for a civil servant to make that determination. It would be difficult, I put it to you, for a Minister to do such a thing given his or her need to work within the budgetary constraints that prevail, but for a civil servant to do so would clearly be ultra vires. You would be looking in the upcoming Bill for those powers to be permitted to civil servants to at least allow for the possibility of a pay rise beyond 1%?

John Collings: I would be interested to see whether the Bill includes those kinds of permissions.

Chair: Okay. What I am going to do is move on from Lady Hermon and we can perhaps come back.

Q39 **Bob Stewart:** Could I just get this right? You provide the funding for all schools. Where do churches and local authorities fit in here? What is their bit in the pie?

Sharon O'Connor: First, local authorities are not in Northern Ireland engaged directly in the delivery of education.

Q40 **Bob Stewart:** It is direct from you to the schools, to the governors?

Sharon O'Connor: It is directly from us to the schools. The other thing is that the church organisations, the transferor organisations as they are described in terms of the Protestant churches, are represented on our board and they transferred their schools to the state, so those are managed directly. The Catholic schools have an organisation called the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and we support them in a whole range of ways. They are not governed and directed by the authority, but we do support them on school maintenance and school building programmes and all manner of other things.

Q41 **Bob Stewart:** There is none of this rubbish about Protestants and Catholics going to schools, they can mix now and teachers are happy with that, are they?

Sharon O'Connor: Increasingly, we have taken forward a Government initiative called Shared Education, which is about trying to get the schools, which are for the most part still separate in many cases, to work together. They share a curriculum delivery.

Q42 **Bob Stewart:** I do not have a problem with a Catholic school and I do not have a problem with a Protestant school, but I do have a problem if they debar people who live nearby from going there.

Sharon O'Connor: Yes. Increasingly, you will find that school populations are as diverse as they are in other places. Most schools will have a diversity of faith and ethnicity as well.

Q43 **Bob Stewart:** Good. How much does a head teacher of a secondary school get on average in a banding?

Sharon O'Connor: I am going to ask my colleague to handle that one.

Bob Stewart: £140,000, £150,000?

John Collings: No. My understanding is that the salary levels in Northern Ireland would not be comparable to some of the salaries that would be paid in the English system. A head teacher's salary would be determined by the size of his or her school, and there is a formula.

Q44 **Bob Stewart:** I totally accept that, but in a banding, £120,000?

John Collings: There may be some at that level but very, very few.

Q45 **Bob Stewart:** In between £100,000 and £120,000?

John Collings: Very, very few.

Q46 **Bob Stewart:** Head of a department?

John Collings: It could be £50,000 to £60,000.

Q47 **Bob Stewart:** When teachers are coming for more money, which I totally understand, the average teacher, say with eight years' experience of teaching history, what would the average teacher get in terms of salary after eight years? Obviously, university, PGCE and some experience, in rough terms so that we have an idea? Everyone talks about needing more money, but for those of us who are not in the education system per se, it would be nice to know exactly where they fit in.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sharon O'Connor: Chair, part of the hesitancy here is because we have an ongoing industrial dispute. I would be concerned that we might give you incorrect information. The thing you need to understand about the system is it is very diverse. We have very large schools, we have some tiny, little schools, and there is some dispute over what salary scales do apply to teachers. They are made up of all sorts of different components in terms of additional payments for head of school responsibilities and other pastoral responsibilities. I am sorry that I do not have an accurate answer for you. I would rather get you an accurate answer. Our director of HR is not accompanying us today, so I feel that I am on uncertain ground with that precision.

Q48 **Bob Stewart:** It would be nice to have an accurate answer. The problem is that if we do not have an accurate answer we have no idea when people say, "We need more money for schools". You say the budget of schools is 80% to 90% on salary, so immediately we have to look at salaries of paid employees and wonder where they are at. I only ask as someone who is an Englishman—actually half English, half Scottish with a bit of Irish in me somewhere. I ask because I do understand the system in my own constituency, but the reason why us lot are here is to try to make some sort of comparison. We understand the English system. Just to give you an example, my secondary head teachers in my constituency all get over £140,000 a year.

Sharon O'Connor: Certainly, I think I am on solid ground to say that our teaching staff would not be as well remunerated, but I would be more comfortable if I could give you precise information. I would prefer, Chair, to refer back to the Committee with that detail. I understand why you need it and sadly I do not have it in any way to be confident to deliver here today.

Q49 **Bob Stewart:** I totally accept you are reticent to answer that question, but I just put it on the record because politicians and people like yourselves need to have a pretty good idea where things stand. Then you can work out where there is a justifiable cause.

Sharon O'Connor: The problem in schools at the moment, and school leaders are telling us this, is that we are in a financial crisis. We could tip into an educational crisis because if we do not have teachers in classrooms to deliver the service we would be in a very difficult situation. We are almost at that tipping point at the moment.

Q50 **Chair:** Supplementary to that, I might ask whether you are detecting an exodus of teaching staff from Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom given what you have said is a better salary scale in GB than Northern Ireland.

John Collings: Some local authorities have very profitable, active recruitment strategies for the students that come out of our colleges as trained teachers. Yes, there is a flow of teachers across to England and other jurisdictions. That said, one of the things is that we do not have a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

shortage of teachers across the board in Northern Ireland. We are still training enough teachers to meet our needs. One of our challenges is that they are not always in the right places or they do not always want to work in the rural areas, for example. Some teachers will be looking for jobs in the towns and cities. Like any other local authority in England, we have that ebb and flow of the workforce across Northern Ireland and, indeed, across different jurisdictions.

Q51 **Chair:** I am guessing very few teachers who perhaps have grown up and trained in GB are tempted across the Irish Sea because of your relatively poor pay scales. Would that be accurate?

Sharon O'Connor: Some do but it is not the salaries that are attracting them.

Q52 **Chair:** There are many things that attract us to delightful parts of the world and salaries are not the only one. Nevertheless, it is not much of an incentive, is it, if teachers perceive that their pay and pensions are going to be inferior if they were to move to a particular part of the United Kingdom when perhaps they were expecting to pretty much have the same terms and conditions of service?

Sharon O'Connor: That is fair.

Q53 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** In Northern Ireland, where regionally or geographically do they have the worst educational attainment?

Sharon O'Connor: John, I am going to defer to you on this. This is straightforward education.

John Collings: The worst educational attainment did you say?

Mr Stephen Hepburn: It is probably a bad term to say the worst. I should say the lowest.

John Collings: Yes. I hope you do not mind but I would have to preface what I am going to say by saying that as a system in Northern Ireland we have been producing some consistently good and improving outcomes for a number of years now. I think what your question is getting at is where the pockets of underachievement are, where in the system that lies.

Mr Stephen Hepburn: Yes.

John Collings: There is a strong evidence base that pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds do not do as well as some others. There is an evidence base that says that, for example, Protestant working class boys do not perform as well as some others. There are a number of what you might call more vulnerable groups in our society that do not perform educationally as well as others. That is not to say that they are not doing well. It is not to say that they are not making progress, but there is a factual evidence base that would suggest that there are pockets of underachievement in our system. What we try to do in the Education



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Authority with the support of the Department is to target resources in those areas and towards those pockets of underachievement.

Q54 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** Would that be predominantly in Belfast or would it be further afield?

John Collings: It could be in the big cities, but there is a rurality issue as well. It is not simply in one area or another.

Q55 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** What are you doing to tackle that?

John Collings: We are doing a number of different things. There are a number of different initiatives.

Q56 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** For example, the Newtownards Road. In previous Committees, we have heard about that area having a low educational attainment.

Sharon O'Connor: I think it is worth recording the fact that boys generally do not do as well as the girls. Generally, across the religious divide, as it is called, we have poor performance in areas of disadvantage and deprivation. In common with most cities, we have areas that have been left behind. You have very built-up areas where you maybe have old schools, which are not as attractive to aspirant parents who perhaps want their children to go to schools in the leafy suburbs. You have schools that are challenged in terms of attracting staff, and you have schools that are poorly resourced, and they are very often in poor buildings. We recognise that in those areas that is very much the case and we are certainly participating in thinking about what we can do to build that up. Our area planning process recognises that. Jim mentioned earlier the idea that in our county towns we want community schools that meet the needs of the local population, and some of them are not in that position as we stand.

Q57 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** Is it the same in nationalist areas as it is in Unionist areas?

Sharon O'Connor: It varies quite dramatically and I would not suggest that it is as simple as saying yes or no to that. It varies. You have schools that are in deprived areas who develop exceptional achievements both at primary and post-primary. You have ones that are failing very badly.

Q58 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** You get that in the UK as well. What I am asking is whether the underachieving schools are predominantly in the nationalist areas or the loyalist areas.

Sharon O'Connor: No, it would not be accurate to say—

Q59 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** Across the board?

Sharon O'Connor: They are across the board. We recognise that in the Protestant Unionist community there are some very particular challenges and that is a matter of record. We are participating in initiatives to direct resources at that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Collings: The good schools, the outstanding schools, in the Northern Ireland system are similar in nature to outstanding schools in the English system. It is where leadership and management is good and effective and strong. It is where quality teaching and learning is good.

Q60 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** Yes, but there are more stresses in Northern Ireland compared to generally in the rest of the UK.

John Collings: You asked specifically what we are doing about it. There are two things I would want to say. First, the common funding formula identifies targeted social need as a factor. There is a factor built into the formula that targets children, and schools receive that funding and are expected to target the different children in that way.

Secondly, what the Department also does is it earmarks funding for specific projects, which we are required to deliver with schools. It may be around literacy for boys or it may be about a project relating to Belfast or Derry, achieving in Belfast, achieving in Derry. There could be a number of different projects going on. There is targeted support for schools and earmarked funding to go into schools as well.

Q61 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** I appreciate this is not your job and I know you do a terrific job with what you are doing, but what role have the community and the community leaders? Is there any way of engaging them to try to raise up educational attainment?

Sharon O'Connor: One of the things we have done in the absence of Government is to work more closely with NILGA. That is the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. We believe that local elected members have a key and critical role in knowing what is best for their communities and working with us to develop those solutions. I would like to see more of that work happening. Obviously, the relationship to community planning is very evident. Unlike this part of the jurisdiction we do not have councils directly involved in the delivery of education, but they are key partners to delivery. That is a piece of work that we would like to develop and further exploit because it has to be about engaging communities to make the changes and transformation that are going to deliver for their children and young people. That is what we are very keen to do.

John Collings: I think every community plan that I have read from the 11 local government districts has a section in it that is about education and skills and developing the skills of the local people. Our officers are actively engaged in the work streams that flow from that, whether they be youth workers or education officers. We are engaging on the ground level in connecting community planning to the education planning.

Q62 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** We have been privileged in this Committee to go over and see the Orange marches, and terrific parades they are. What are you doing to engage the Orange Order? When I look at the marchers, you have kids that size and you have boys and girls in their teens. Surely



HOUSE OF COMMONS

if these Orange Orders can inspire young people to dress up so smart and look so great and be so proud and everything, they can inspire them to try a bit harder at school.

Sharon O'Connor: In my introduction, I mentioned the fact that—

Mr Stephen Hepburn: I might say on the nationalist side as well.

Sharon O'Connor: Yes, I accept the point you are making. At the outset I talked about working with 120,000 children and young people through our youth services, and that would involve uniformed organisations, church groups and local community activist organisations, all manner of youth and community groups. In that way we are actively and directly plugged into local communities. We will work with all the youth organisations and we have a youth strategy that we are about to start a community engagement around, which is looking at how we fund youth services in the region. There is an opportunity for any organisation that is working with young people to work through that strategy and contribute to the formation of it and look to ways in which we can support the educational outcomes of particularly children who are disadvantaged or detached in many ways from aspiration in terms of education.

Q63 **Mr Stephen Hepburn:** What about local heroes, as in, say, Rory McIlroy or rugby players or footballers or whoever? We have a lad at Sunderland now who is going to play for Northern Ireland. What about involving them in inspiring young people, going into schools?

Sharon O'Connor: I can say last week I was at a school posing with a very large rugby player called Rory Best. I am very small; I should have brought an orange box with me. It made for quite an interesting photograph. Yes, we obviously try to embrace our local heroes, and we do not have to ask them to do it. Those people come forward. They are keen to co-operate and support education in their own areas and they do it with absolutely fulsome heart. I can tell you that whenever we are opening a school you will see those people feature. Some of them support their own boards of governors at local schools. Northern Ireland is a very intimate sort of community, so those community relationships are quite strong. We do not have to persuade or twist arms to get people to participate in making things better for children and young people, which is greatly appreciated.

Q64 **John Grogan:** I have been listening closely, so to pick up one or two of the points that my colleagues have made, on youth services could you just say a few more words about this consultation you are doing? What are the issues? You fund youth services, do you?

Sharon O'Connor: We do, yes.

Q65 **John Grogan:** What are the issues involved in this consultation?

Sharon O'Connor: I will just say a few remarks by way of introduction and my colleagues no doubt can contribute if they think I am not giving you an accurate picture.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Previously, there was a youth council in Northern Ireland that funded the established network of youth organisations. Since the development of the authority, we have taken on a broader remit. There was always a large activist community in terms of doing things with young people in their area, be that boxing clubs, sporting clubs, pipe bands or music organisations. All sorts of different activities were ongoing. We recognised that the model was that these established organisations were funded year on year and that perhaps we did not have the opportunity to invite new and innovative organisations and new approaches to be funded.

We are at the start of the engagement process to consult on a strategy to better support the network of organisations who work with children and young people, particularly in our rural communities. We tend to always think of disadvantage being in the inner cities but it could just as easily be in a small village down the end of the Ards peninsula. I am not playing to the gallery; I just realise I said the Ards peninsula unintentionally. In small communities, you can have problems with drugs, you can have problems with all manner of antisocial behaviour. Our new strategy is an attempt to open up the opportunity and see if we can be a little bit more directive in our investment at a local community level. I would invite the Committee to have a look at the consultation document, which will be available shortly, John?

John Collings: Absolutely, and to bring a little bit more of a medium to longer-term strategy to that because those organisations were funded on an annual almost day-to-day basis. What we want to do as part of this consultation is to look at how we can fund that over time to give a little bit more certainty to those organisations in their planning and their delivery of service.

Q66 **John Grogan:** There is nothing wrong with playing to the gallery about all of that. Jim mentioned the confidence and supply agreement, and I think he quoted the figure of £41 million. Is that a figure that you recognise and where has that money gone? Is it possible to say that it has gone to this or that or has it gone to the general education budget?

Sharon O'Connor: I am going to invite Joyce to respond to that.

Joyce Bill: Obviously, the Department of Education are in the lead in terms of determining and working with the Department of Finance on where that money will go. Our understanding is that that money has gone to sustain services that would have been cut if that money had not been available.

Q67 **John Grogan:** I see. Lady Hermon mentioned the teachers' dispute. To clarify in my own mind, if there was a Minister would we expect the Minister to be involved in those sorts of discussions or would it be left to you to do it? How would it work?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Collings: The Minister would not be involved in the discussions. The discussions are through the Northern Ireland teachers' council, which is essentially the management side and the union side.

Q68 **John Grogan:** To clarify, a Minister would have to give authorisation for any shift in the position? You could sit around the table and talk to them and have coffee and sandwiches and things, but you cannot really shift the position at the moment even if you wanted to?

John Collings: There are things that we can talk around on terms and conditions and there are things that the Department has to take responsibility for, but the Minister ultimately has to sign it off.

Q69 **John Grogan:** We heard a little bit of a mention of area planning and so on. I think there are six criteria, aren't there, for a sustainable score, which goes back to 2009?

John Collings: Yes.

Q70 **John Grogan:** It is to do with size of school and performance and leadership and so on. Of the schools in Northern Ireland, how many passed the full six?

John Collings: I do not have that information but I can certainly provide it.

John Grogan: Okay. It would be interesting to know.

John Collings: I can give you a feel for that. We have nearly 1,200 schools across Northern Ireland and a large proportion are sustainable and viable and thriving and moving forward, but there are some that struggle to meet all of the criteria all of the time. I do not have the detail but I can provide it for you.

Q71 **John Grogan:** It would be useful to have the detail. As I understand it, then, the area strategies are to deal with this. Are they still proceeding without the Executive and so on?

John Collings: Yes. We are working on the ground. We have an infrastructure, a governance approach to area planning, and ourselves and all of our sectoral partners work together in trying to come together and bring forward local solutions to local challenges.

Q72 **John Grogan:** As the Chair said, it is difficult, obviously, with the political decisions. I have an estimate here of 42,000 surplus places in the primary schools and 21,000 across post-primary schools. Can you at the moment take difficult decisions where you have to decide on closures or is that not possible?

John Collings: We can take them so far.

Q73 **John Grogan:** How far?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Collings: We can publish development proposals and we can do the consultation. Part of the process we can deliver, but every decision, every development proposal, has to be signed off by a Minister.

Q74 **John Grogan:** The trouble at the moment then is that you can take it so far, so is there effectively blight hanging over various schools and things? They are in the process but isn't that a bit of a disadvantage?

Sharon O'Connor: Sadly, that is the reality and it is very unfair for the schools. The school leaders will tell you that once we have published an area plan that names their school, then parents will start to think, "Is there a long-term future for that school? Do I need to send my child to another school?" There is a self-fulfilling prophecy there that is entirely negative for those schools and causes additional burdens on nearby schools. Yes, we recognise that. We are doing our best to diligently carry out our duties to run the area planning process. We continue to do that, but as the Committee has already determined, we do need a Minister to ultimately sign off on those significant decisions as regards school closures.

John Collings: Coming back to a point I made earlier, the conversations we can have locally are different if we were, I guess, casting some of those local area planning solutions in terms of a bigger capital investment programme and a transformation strategy. That is the point we are trying to bring to the table today and in our submission, that if we can see area planning as part of a wider transformation piece, then it is a different kind of conversation we can have with local communities.

Q75 **John Grogan:** Of course. I have two quick ones. You talked a little bit about teacher training, and although teachers are paid less in Northern Ireland than in England, teacher training seems to be a bit more expensive. Is that right and should that be the case?

John Collings: I do not know, I am sorry.

Q76 **John Grogan:** Okay. What about SEN provision and so on? Again, this is not just a problem in Northern Ireland, but why are nearly four in five SEN statements completed outside the 26-week period? Is there anything you can do to change that?

John Collings: Yes, there is. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report in 2017, I think, made comment on the fact that the statementing process was taking too long. In response to that, what we are doing with the Department, which leads on this matter, is to build the capacity of the system to carry out assessments more quickly. There is a lot of talent out there in schools and it does not necessarily have to be conducted at the centre, so to speak. The challenge there is to build the capacity of the system to carry out the assessments that are needed.

Crucially on the SEN agenda for us, and it is part of this transformation piece, it is about shifting resources and investing earlier in earlier intervention and prevention. In a sense, it is one of the keys that will



HOUSE OF COMMONS

unlock improved outcomes for children and young people. All systems in my experience over 30-odd years in education spend too much on reacting at the harder end and not enough on the earlier intervention and prevention end.

Sharon O'Connor: Could I just add one practical point? When we realised towards the first year of operation that we were starting to face very considerable financial challenges, we applied a voluntary severance scheme. Part of our challenge is we lost a lot of talent and we are having to rebuild as we proceed. There were knock-on consequences in the quality of our services, which I think we are beginning to recover from. You cannot let people and experience go without there being an impact on services.

Q77 **Chair:** When you were set up as an authority, presumably one of the drivers for that was a desire to make some efficiency savings, which I assume have been realised, have they?

Sharon O'Connor: Just for context, the Committee needs to be aware that there was a very lengthy period in the run-up to the establishment of the Education Authority. There was a model called the education and skills authority, which was the original prototype model. While the legacy boards were preparing for this reform process, they reduced staff numbers—they pared down. A lot of the savings were made in advance of the establishment of the authority, so there was not as much efficiency saving to be captured from our go date. Recognising and recording that, we have still managed to capture something like £64 million-worth of savings.

Joyce Bill: Just to put this in context, both in the period that Sharon was talking about before the establishment of EA and post-EA there have been 850 posts that have been let go at the centre. Some of these have been senior posts, as you would expect when we restructure from five education and library boards to one single authority for Northern Ireland. We have made significant downsizing in that. What that means is that if you ring up you cannot necessarily contact the person that you used to work with and contact over a number of years. It also means that as part of our approach to try to save money to deal with the significant budgetary constraints that we have—and just remember £233 million has come out of the system—we have had to look at doing things differently. We have had to move towards digital provision. A significant amount of that 850 has come out since post-EA has gone live.

Q78 **Chair:** Are you anticipating any further savings? You talked about numbers before that are quite surprising.

Joyce Bill: In an organisation, similar to a school where 80% or 90% of their costs is staffing, that would be the case across EA. We obviously are undertaking a number of service reviews and that may lead to some staff re-engineering in terms of moving towards digital provision, but we have



to let our staff go through a VES scheme. We are anticipating some but not to the same level that would have happened in the past.

Chair: I cut off Lady Hermon when she was in full flow, so I feel duty bound to return to Lady Hermon for a brief supplementary.

Q79 **Lady Hermon:** That is very kind of you, Chair. I did not hear the word "brief". Beautifully cut off earlier on, but I am back.

There are a number of things, in fact, that I want to tease out, please, because we have touched on really important issues. My colleague John earlier mentioned assessments of special educational needs. The response was, "We are building capacity". What does that translate into? We have a number of parents who are extremely concerned about how long it takes for a child to be statemented and the impact that that delay has on that particular child and, indeed, the family as a whole. What on earth does building capacity mean? Just tell me when it is going to improve.

Sharon O'Connor: I am going to invite John to respond to that, but I might add by way of introduction that we are working now to extend access to schools. We are not waiting for statements, we are trying to provide services directly to children where they need them in their schools, and we are taking children younger and younger in that environment. We are not waiting for the statement to provide support and that is the model that we are developing.

John Collings: It is a two-pronged approach; at least two prongs.

Lady Hermon: Yes, at least two prongs.

John Collings: The first one, as Sharon said and as I said before, is about building the capacity of the system to intervene earlier and prevent children moving along the spectrum of need and addressing their needs as early as possible and putting the necessary support in.

Then for those children who do need a statutory assessment, when I say building the capacity, that is about training. It is about training teachers, school leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators in schools to enable them to be able to carry out part, if not all, of the assessment processes.

Q80 **Lady Hermon:** I thought it implied that there was going to be recruitment of those who are specialists in this area.

Sharon O'Connor: We are doing that. We have developed nurture units in schools. We are looking at elevating the professional training and development of staff who are going to be working with children directly. That is all part of the transformation programme and that aspect of special and additional needs. We are working that through with the people on the ground, the school leaders, the people who are involved, and we have been consulting very widely, particularly on areas like nursery. We have consulted with parents. We have consulted with the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

agencies who are involved directly with parents and young children, and we will continue to do that in terms of trying to improve access.

John Collings: What special educational needs co-ordinators, SENCOs, and principals of special schools say to me is, "John, we can help here. We can do this. We are the experts as well. Don't forget that. Use us. Build us into the model more", and that is what we want to do.

Sharon O'Connor: Lady Hermon, I just might add that we built one of the most outstanding community-based special educational schools in Castle Tower in Ballymena, a world-class facility that deals with the needs of children from three to 19. Again, it is well worth a visit. We continue to try to improve the special schools arrangements as well.

Q81 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you, and perhaps we will try to do that. To follow on from that, there appeared to be a linkage, but correct me if I am wrong. When the explanation was given that the Education Authority is trying to build capacity to address the backlog and the delay in providing statements and we now have a two-pronged approach, the conversation then went on immediately to the voluntary severance arrangements and the loss of experienced people who left. Are you saying that, in fact, the people who left have contributed to the backlog and the delays in statements for special educational needs or was that just the roll of the conversation?

John Collings: That was just a general point made in terms of the people who have been lost to the organisation.

Joyce Bill: As part of our VES process, whenever we develop business cases to look at whether or not staff can be released, we have to look at the impact on services and the mitigation action. For example, our VES is obviously voluntary by the name. We do not let lots of bus drivers go because we have to get the kids to school. Equally, in areas like SEN we do not let areas go where we need the resources, but similar to all of our provision we are doing a number of service reviews to look at how we improve services.

Q82 **Lady Hermon:** Are you saying the two things are not connected?

Sharon O'Connor: There is a general connection insofar as we are not letting educational psychologists go. If you have reductions in your admin support, if you have managers go, there is bound to be a consequence and that was the point I was making. You cannot let staff go without there being a knock-on consequence. That is not to say we let essential staff go. We did not let essential staff go.

Q83 **Lady Hermon:** You did not let essential staff go?

Sharon O'Connor: No.

Q84 **Lady Hermon:** That is not a reason for the delays in making the statements for special educational needs?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sharon O'Connor: I didn't say it was a delay in making statements. I was saying it was a general contributor to our challenges in terms of service delivery and it continues to be.

Q85 **Lady Hermon:** The other thing that puzzled me—and again, Sharon, it was something that you said that I thought was very encouraging because I was not aware of it—is that the Education Authority has worked with NILGA in the absence of a functioning Assembly. What I would like to hear is what about working with the political parties? Education is a devolved matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is a great regret, it is a bitter regret, that our MLAs are not doing the job for which they were elected and have not been doing since January 2017. What relationships or meetings do you have with the main political parties and what pressure is the Education Authority putting on them to get together and have a Minister of Education back at Stormont?

Sharon O'Connor: We continue to meet with all the political parties. As I said at the outset, the political parties are represented on our board, so they have an intimate knowledge of the challenges we face. We meet with parties on a fairly frequent basis.

Q86 **Lady Hermon:** Do you mean the education spokesperson for each of the five main political parties or do you mean party leaders? Do you meet with Arlene Foster?

Sharon O'Connor: No, education spokespeople.

Q87 **Lady Hermon:** So it is at that level. Has there been engagement with the leaders of the five main political parties, with Arlene Foster, with Michelle O'Neill?

Sharon O'Connor: No. We have dealt with the education spokespeople and we have been feeding them regular analysis in terms of the financial challenges that we face. We have more routine contact with them about obviously local issues that they are engaged with. The last time I met with NILGA, which was only a couple of weeks ago, we had the former Education Minister in attendance at that.

Q88 **Lady Hermon:** A former Education Minister?

Sharon O'Connor: A former Education Minister.

Q89 **Lady Hermon:** The point I am making is it is obvious from what you have said and the evidence that you have given—which is really interesting and helpful to us in formulating our conclusions for our report—that the key is we need a Minister. I would have thought, given the detrimental impact on our education system, our schools, everything, of the absence of a Minister, the Education Authority would have seen fit to have met with the leaders of the main political parties. Is that not seen as essential?

Sharon O'Connor: As I said earlier, we are a service delivery organisation. We operate under the auspices of the Department of



Education. The Permanent Secretary is meeting with senior political people on a fairly routine basis. I do not think it is our role to try to influence the political process. I think that it is our role to inform and support the political process. I think that we have already made our case fairly clear in terms of our needs, what we require, and how we are enabled to deliver on some of the programmes that we have in the absence of ministerial support.

Q90 **Lady Hermon:** Might you have a rethink after this Committee session?

Sharon O'Connor: I am sure the board of the authority is very happy to engage in whatever way we can usefully to try to produce solutions. The course that the board has steered in this absence has been around trying to demonstrate to the local community that we as a board have unity of purpose and competence in what we are trying to do and to provide reassurance to the community that we do have a programme of work that we are continuing to deliver for children and young people. That is what we will seek to do and we will continue to lobby to get the resources to both improve the pace of what we do and improve the quality of what we do. That is our agenda. If we got support to invest in transformation, to incentivise some of the things we are struggling to do in area planning, we would be in a better place, but you are right, the absence of Ministers is not helpful to us.

Lady Hermon: "Not helpful", but is it detrimental? That is the word I used.

Chair: I think we can agree on that.

Lady Hermon: Can we just have the words from the Education Authority? Detrimental?

Chair: I am going to draw our proceedings to a conclusion at this particular point. I think we can agree that the absence of an Executive at Stormont is definitely harmful to the progression that you have described today; that is to say the improvement of education in Northern Ireland and working on the excellent results that you have been able to achieve in your short history in relation to standards in Northern Ireland, for which we are extremely grateful.

We are also very grateful to you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to come and talk to us today. You can be sure that everything you have said will better inform and populate our report when we come to publish it. Thank you very much for being with us today.

Sharon O'Connor: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity. It is much appreciated.

John Collings: Thank you, Chair.

Joyce Bill: Thank you.