

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 31 October 2018

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Members present: Dr Andrew Murrison (Chair); Maria Caulfield; Mr Robert Goodwill; Lady Hermon; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart.

Questions 91 - 125

Witnesses

I: Deirdre Gillespie, Principal, St Mary's Grammar School and President, Association of School and College Leaders NI; Dr Graham Gault, Principal, Maghaberry Primary School and Secretary, Strategic Primary Principals Forum; Jo McColgan, Principal, Ashfield Boys' High School; Nigel Frith, Principal, Drumragh Integrated College.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Deirdre Gillespie, Dr Graham Gault, Jo McColgan and Nigel Frith.

Q91 Chair: Good morning, everyone. Thank you ever so much for coming today. It is a huge investment of your time. We are very appreciative of that. As you know, we have taken to investigating things that would ordinarily be devolved and, to be honest, none of our business, but, since the Budget has been set here in Westminster and there is no Executive at Stormont, we feel that it is the duty of this Committee to investigate particularly matters around funding for public services in Northern Ireland. This is part of that. Our intention is to produce a report on this, and the evidence you give us will be important in informing that report, so thank you very much indeed for being with us today. Very briefly, could you introduce yourselves, say where you come from, and then we will get on to some questions?

Jo McColgan: My name is Jo McColgan. I am absolutely honoured to say that I am the principal of Ashfield Boys' High School in east Belfast. Do you want to know a little about the school?

Chair: No, that is fine. We will probably come to that in evidence, because we have read the written material you submitted and that is really helpful.

Deirdre Gillespie: My name is Deirdre Gillespie. I am the principal of St Mary's Grammar School in Magherafelt, and I am also president of ASCL, which represents 200 vice-principals and principals in Northern Ireland.

Dr Gault: I am Graham Gault. I am the principal of Maghaberry Primary School and Nursery Unit. I am also secretary of the Strategic Primary Principals Forum, which is a group of 400 primary school principals from all across Northern Ireland and every sector. I am here on behalf of that group, representing the voice of 92,000 primary school children.

Nigel Frith: Good morning. My name is Nigel Frith. I am the principal of Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh, and I am also currently the chair of APTIS, which is the Association of Principal Teachers in Integrated Schools.

Q92 Chair: You are all very welcome. Can I start with some questions about the Budget and how it is impacting you? It seems to me that school funding is a major issue across the United Kingdom at the moment and that impacts on Northern Ireland too, with the added complexity of not having Ministers at Stormont. My question is where you think the pressures are mainly felt within the school system and how they are affecting the school experience of your learners. I wonder if we can start from a primary perspective with you, Graham.



Dr Gault: My own primary school is sustainable and performs very well in every one of the six sustainable school priorities, apart from its financial position. 95% of my spend is on staff and I am not overstaffed; I am understaffed. That leaves me pennies to run the school. My deficit at the end of this financial year will be around £130,000, which is about 23% or 24% of my budget. My school is just not financially sustainable, and I have found myself in the humiliating position of begging my parents to support the well-being of their children by providing Pritt Stick, reading books, tissues and soap. I actually have parents—this is not a joke—who are donating toilet roll to my school. It feels Victorian. It is a disgrace.

I have the greatest respect for my post-primary colleagues here. In international comparative studies, the post-primary work in our country is something to be very proud of but, on behalf of the children I represent, I have a huge concern about the AWPU. That is the age-weighted pupil unit. In primary, that is a value of £1,998. In post-primary it is slightly more, but there are multiplying factors. For a primary school budget such as mine, for a year 1 to 7 child, it is multiplied by 1.08, which means I get £2,157 per child. The day they leave my school and go to a post-primary school, between year 7 and year 8, that child is suddenly worth £3,453. That is a difference of £1,300. When they go to years 13 and 14, that value is multiplied by 2.18, giving a value of £4,481 per child. That is more than double the value of my child.

I am arguing that the Committee looks at the research that shows, in so many cases, that investment in early years is important to the development, well-being and life chances of our children. I am not arguing for less for my colleagues here. What they do with their money is wonderful, but I am saying there is a huge disparity with primary and nursery, which must be addressed immediately.

Q93 **Chair:** Yet primary is doing very well in Northern Ireland. It is beating the UK average.

Dr Gault: That is not because of money. It is because of the workforce we have. If I give an example of my own school, teachers are working well into their evenings, to midnight. At 1.00 in the morning I receive emails from people who buy Blu Tack and Sellotape for the school. The situation is ridiculous.

Before you move on, I will just give you some actual examples. Again, this is not a criticism of the way post-primary is funded. I have the greatest respect for it and these folk need their money. This is just an example of how poorly primary is funded. At the end of 2017-18, my school had an enrolment of 290 and a budget for the following year of £707,000. If I look at other schools with similar or less enrolment in the post-primary sector, Coleraine College had 230 children at the end of 2017-18 and a budget of £1.186 million. That is almost £500,000 more—what I could do with that money for my children. Corpus Christi had 57 fewer children, but a budget of almost £700,000 more.



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Additionally, there are services provided to children in the post-primary sector that are not available in the primary sector, such as counselling, for example. When a child moves to year 8, counselling services are available. In primary schools they are not available. I say to parents, "Go and talk to your GP or go and join a waiting list somewhere". If I have a year 7 child whose sibling is in my post-primary colleague's year 8 class, and they have experienced a bereavement in their family, counselling is available at no expense initially at the post-primary school, but in the primary school it is not available. Many of my colleagues who have a little money are spending that on those essential services, which should be provided. The money in primary school is totally unacceptable and unsustainable, and I see every day the faces of my children who are affected by it.

Q94 **Chair:** Jo, you started your teaching career in primary, did you not?

Jo McColgan: I did, yes.

Q95 **Chair:** Would you agree with the points that Graham has made?

Jo McColgan: Yes, I would. I will try to cover my own school's point of view and Graham's. You asked the question about where the pressure is felt in funding. I would say it is right across the sector and across every school, if I am being honest. In my own school, class sizes are getting bigger. We have had to reduce the number of teachers through voluntary redundancy. We have no money to replace technology, for example. I have a legacy issue of old computers in one part of the school, with approximately 104 machines. I need to replace Macs for particular subject areas. These are all A-level and GCSE courses. To replace all of that equipment, depending on what deals I can get, would be somewhere between £83,000 and £100,000, which I simply do not have, so I am trying to paper over the cracks. That has a direct impact on learning and on the facilities and resources that pupils have access to.

As I said, I had three voluntary redundancies in this last year—one teaching member of staff and two non-teaching staff. There are increases in operating costs. We are not getting the money to cover those increases. Although the outcomes in my own school have improved significantly over the past three years in relation to all headline targets, we have gone from a £4,000 surplus to a £136,000 deficit. I fear that, while our agreed three-year budget takes us back to the surplus, it is based on losing another three members of staff. That has a catastrophic effect. I am old-school, in the sense that education is about people, relationships and working together for the good of young people, but, if we lose that, I worry that the whole system crumbles.

In relation to Graham and the AWP, in my own school, a key stage 3 or 4 pupil gets £3,625 and a sixth-form pupil gets £4,653. It is £4,400 per pupil if we average it out. I am led to believe that last year in England the average spend per pupil was £5,870. That is a difference of approximately 26%. What we could all do with the additional 20% to



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26%. I believe there are ways to manage that at the centre to provide that. I would much rather have the autonomy to have that level of income and put it where it is needed, then I would be able to afford computers and move my school back to surplus without losing staff.

Chair: On that subject, we might go to Robert Goodwill, and we will come back to some of the issues around the global funding settlement.

Q96 **Mr Goodwill:** It is interesting what we have heard about the amount of funding per pupil and the proportion of your budget that goes on staffing. For the other things you have to buy, I understand there is a rather inflexible central procurement system that you have to contend with. I will initially ask Deirdre and Nigel if you would be better off if you could procure locally or tender for services. Are you satisfied with the way the procurement system works for your schools?

Deirdre Gillespie: My school is a voluntary grammar school. We are our own employing authority and therefore we have the autonomy to procure our own services and goods. I have worked in the system for a controlled grammar school where that was not the case, and I have certainly found having the autonomy to procure our own services and goods to be a much more flexible system, which allows savings to be incurred. I very much support the view that more money should be going centrally into schools, but schools should have the autonomy to procure their own services and goods.

Q97 **Mr Goodwill:** You would assume that, by buying things in large quantities, you get the best deal possible, but the opposite seems to be the case from what you are saying.

Deirdre Gillespie: Absolutely, and it is around the timeframes of gathering up the requests from different schools that want similar products, and for that procurement to be rolled out by EA. That is the main issue. For example, in something as simple as recruitment, my understanding is there have to be so many job advertisements available before they will go to press centrally, whereas I can lift the phone and negotiate a price for an advert within five days. So it is a very different business model from schools that are governed by the Education Authority.

Nigel Frith: Good morning and thank you so much for this opportunity. We are very grateful to be heard and there are urgent things that we wish to say today. I was mindful, travelling over last night, of the signs on the railway stations to "mind the gap". We are here to say not only do we mind the gap, but the gap is getting wider and is becoming a dangerous place to be.

I would like to combine my answer to your question with the first that was asked, if that is alright. In terms of procurement, grant-maintained integrated schools are not under the umbrella of the Education Authority and, like Deirdre, we are not bound by those procurement rules. That can



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be both a blessing and a problem. Yes, we have the freedom to go and find the best deals for ourselves, and we do that routinely. However, in terms of the ability to carry a deficit, under the Education Authority umbrella we would be permitted to carry a deficit of up to 5% or £75,000. To me £75,000 sounds suspiciously like 1.5 teachers. A grant-maintained integrated school is managed directly by a bank manager, who is not tolerant of any kind of deficit and we do not have the facility to run 5%, £75,000 or anything else. We have bank managers saying to us, "Are you balancing your books or not?" I feel there is an inconsistency there that is worth highlighting this morning.

The impact on us as a school is in three key areas. The first is within the school itself. As our budget reduces, the first and major impact is on our staffing levels. We are clear that our budget is reducing. The Northern Ireland Audit Office released its finding last week that, in real terms, over the last five years, close to 10% of funding into schools has been lost. That reduction is crippling our ability to meet the needs of our students. When we cannot afford to maintain staffing levels, the first area we looked at years ago was our non-teaching staffing support. Someone mentioned to me last week, "I'm sure your librarian doesn't like what is happening in your library", and I said, "We have not had the luxury of a librarian for five years now". Once you have dealt with all of the savings that can be made there and are down to a minimum level of staffing, you then lose teachers.

Q98 Mr Goodwill: On that, in schools I have been involved with, teachers expect to be moved up a grade every year. Have you put a brake on that and not given people their expected grade improvements just because they have been there for a certain time, or is that still as it was?

Nigel Frith: We continue to give incremental increases. We do not have a choice about that, so that is a further impact on budgets, whether we like it or not. Of course, our staff deserve some sort of increase, because it keeps them in line with rises in the cost of living.

Mr Goodwill: That is based on time served rather than performance.

Nigel Frith: It is, yes. Once you start losing staff, the curriculum is squeezed and you are faced with awful choices like whether to stop running different A-level courses. Once that begins, a downward spiral kicks in. If you are not able to offer the breadth of curriculum you need to meet the needs of your students, you have students bailing out who decide that perhaps they will go elsewhere and search for provision in another school, where they encounter similar problems. The problem then is everything becomes more difficult. We have mentioned the AWPU; if we are losing students, then ultimately we are losing funding, which means we are losing more staff, and so the thing begins to replicate in a negative way.

We also find our staff are having, year on year, to teach more and more subjects that they were never trained in. In order to cover the curriculum



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with fewer staff, we are having to say to them, "I know you trained as an RE teacher, but this year I need you to teach geography". They are having to pick up subjects and train to be teachers of subjects that were never their comfort zone in the first place. We also find that class sizes are increasing. In order to put a teacher in front of every class, if you do not have enough teaching staff, you have no option except to increase the size of the classes, so we are faced with going beyond the Department of Education recommended levels, particularly for practical subjects. We are looking at risk assessments and how we can manage the risks that come with increasing those class sizes. That is proving to be a difficult issue for us at the moment, because we want every child to be safe and, equally, we want them all to have access to the curriculum.

We then find that the pressure on staff to cope with the pressures they are facing is increasing. We are concerned about their welfare. My contention is that our staff have gone beyond professionalism into heroism in the ways they are coping with these pressures now. Equally, where we notice they are starting to buckle under the pressure, the irony is that we are paying for supply staff to cover their absences. Here we are again paying money that we do not have.

The second area we are finding is the one I mentioned ago. As GMIS, grant-maintained integrated schools, we enjoy a level of autonomy and we appreciate it in a way, but the inability to carry a deficit is a huge problem to us.

The third area I want to mention this morning is external support provided to the school. The obvious area is special needs, and I am sure we will talk about that this morning.

Mr Goodwill: There are some questions from colleagues who are coming on to that later, so I should probably stop you there.

Nigel Frith: Thank you. I will mention just one more, if I may. I am so sorry. It is provision for students' mental health, which is a different area entirely.

Mr Goodwill: There was something in the Budget this week about more money for mental health support for schools in England.

Nigel Frith: I am acutely aware, as are my colleagues, of the range of mental health problems that students are dealing with now.

Q99 **Mr Goodwill:** We will come on to that with other colleagues very soon. Going back to procurement, we have heard from two of you that you have flexibility, which seems to work very well, but the other two have to participate in this centralised system. Could that be improved or would you rather have more freedom?

Jo McColgan: I would like to have more freedom, the same as my colleagues. If I may pick up on one of the points made about running a deficit of £75,000, the Education Authority have made it very clear that



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that will not be continuing and that schools have entered into strict negotiations addressing that, so I hope that will change, which would even the playing field. I understand, because I also taught in the grant-maintained integrated sector, for almost 18 years, so I have experience of that.

In relation to pay rises, you are quite correct that they are incremental based on experience, but I believe that is a negotiation ongoing between the teacher negotiating committee and our trade union representatives.

In relation to procurement, I can give some very simple examples. At the start of this year, I needed to purchase lighting equipment for an A-level class. To go through the procurement list, it was £320. I was able to get the exact same piece of equipment with extras, through Amazon, for £54 but I was not allowed to buy it. I had to go through the list.

Mr Goodwill: That is presumably not including the cost of the bureaucrats who have done that deal for you.

Jo McColgan: To give you another simple example, I needed a new washing machine for hospitality and home economics. To go through the procurement list it was £349. I was able to buy a better machine from a local well-known high street supplier at £190. Those two pieces alone would have had a saving of £425, but I am not allowed to do that. It gets worse. Ink cartridges for computers and printers I was able to get for £6,000 less than procurement. Yes, I would like to have the autonomy. I go back to the AWPU. I know what my school needs. I know where those resources need to go, yes, with all levels of accountability, but give us the autonomy to be able to do that and we will make real savings. I believe we will make real savings or, if we have to stay within the procurement system that currently exists, if we can find better deals, let us get them.

Mr Goodwill: It makes you wonder if the people doing these deals even have access to the internet.

Jo McColgan: It is a modern world.

Q100 **Chair:** The counter-argument is that it presumably took you a little time to source your money-saving things and you probably did not include that in your costings.

Jo McColgan: I have a dedicated member of staff who works in admin, who will go through all of the orders and forms and try to find them.

Q101 **Chair:** You are confident that the savings outweigh the cost of that dedicated member of staff.

Jo McColgan: 100%.

Q102 **Mr Goodwill:** Do you have similar examples, Graham?



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Dr Gault: I have a similar experience. I do not have much money to procure anything, but I have a similar experience. There are definitely cheaper options on Amazon for many of the things that I buy for my school, but I do not have the luxury of a dedicated member of staff to look after admin in that way.

Deirdre Gillespie: Most voluntary grammar schools would have a bursar of some type, and part of their role and responsibilities would be to look after procurement.

Q103 **Chair:** This procurement issue is quite important, because the Audit Office highlighted it fairly recently. The message I am getting is that this can be done fairly simply locally, without the need to involve extra bureaucracy, which would outweigh some of the savings that you have identified.

Deirdre Gillespie: On a different level, working as a collection of schools through area partnerships, you can bargain collectively on a four or five-school basis and reduce costs for the likes of oil for heating. We have engaged in that type of activity as well. We, as the voluntary grammar in that scenario, have been the group that has held the account and we have been able to have real buying power.

Q104 **Chair:** That sounds sensible and no doubt you are lobbying the Department of Education on this issue. What is the road block, do you think? I think I know the answer. Why is local procurement not happening in the way that you have just described?

Deirdre Gillespie: We are caught in a system of inefficiencies in our education system, based on tradition, and no one wants to take a root-and-branch review of transforming our schools estate.

Q105 **Chair:** To resolve that we obviously need Ministers at Stormont.

Deirdre Gillespie: Absolutely.

Jo McColgan: At an authority level, you have huge procurement departments that employ a lot of staff that issue the controls to the sector. You are looking at a complete radical review and restructuring if that were to happen.

Deirdre Gillespie: In schools like mine, voluntary grammars, we would be subjected to two external audits each year. They would not necessarily happen in controlled or maintained sectors. Their accountability would be held centrally. While we have that autonomy, we are still subjected to two external audits per year to ensure that we are accountable with the funds that have been entrusted to us.

Nigel Frith: The voluntary grammar and integrated sectors are very similar in the ways in which they are governed and we manage our budgets. There are blessings. From listening to the stories of Jo and



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Graham, my goodness, they are horrific and we are thankfully free of that.

The bottom line is, even if the issues are resolved around procurement and the ability of schools to generate their own savings, we are still tinkering around the edges of the major problem, which is an education system in Northern Ireland that suffers horrific duplication. There is an urgent need for transformation of the system. We are networking with one another as principals. As schools, we are sharing concerns. Even standing outside this morning, we were busy chatting about some of the difficulties we face, but what we are not hearing is a sense of leadership and a vision for the education system in Northern Ireland that says that real savings are to be made by reforming this system into something that is altogether more cost-efficient and more effective for the children we are trying to serve. Until that issue is resolved, we are just playing around the edges and, at worst, we are straightening out the chairs on the deck of the Titanic.

Q106 Lady Hermon: I heard the word "Titanic" and I know the end to that story. That was a very striking reference, Nigel, but earlier you referred to what we see as we step off the train coming into Paddington, "Mind the gap". You said, "The gap is widening and it is a dangerous place to be". Those were your exact words, "a dangerous place to be". What did you mean by "dangerous"? Do you mean schools will close? Do you mean children are going to suffer even more? We have heard that they are suffering already and we will come back to that, but what did you mean by "dangerous"?

Nigel Frith: It is dangerous in the sense that I am deeply concerned about the welfare of my staff. My central role as a principal has become trying to scan across the school on a daily basis to see who is okay and who is not, and to try to get to the ones who are not okay before they fall.

Lady Hermon: These are your staff.

Nigel Frith: They are staff, and students as well. The staff are busy trying to look after the students. I have a concern for both groups, but I see that we are moving into more and more dangerous territory. I am using the word "dangerous" because I am deeply concerned. This is urgent now. Gone are the days when we were saying, "Things are a bit tough. We are having to make some cuts. We are having to make a redundancy here and there. We are making these savings". We are beyond that.

The Northern Ireland Office said it believed we were approaching a tipping point. The only aspect of that with which I disagree is I think we have reached the tipping point. The system is already tipping into a much more dangerous place. I am also concerned that we are not able to provide educationally for our students in a way that we believe is right, but I am also concerned, as I mentioned earlier, that there is an epidemic



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of mental health problems in our schools that is nowhere near being addressed effectively.

Lady Hermon: Graham, you were nodding in agreement. You said at the beginning that you are the voice for 92,000 children.

Dr Gault: Yes, that is across the 400 schools that I represent.

Q107 **Lady Hermon:** Reflecting on the number of pupils and staff you represent, I am very concerned about what I have heard and we are only halfway into this evidence session. You are nodding your head. How is morale? How is the mental well-being of staff and pupils?

Dr Gault: I can tell you that my profession is humiliated. I as a principal am humiliated.

Lady Hermon: That is a terrible thing to feel.

Dr Gault: It is, but it is true.

Q108 **Lady Hermon:** By whom do you feel humiliated? By the system?

Dr Gault: By the system. First, there has been no teacher pay rise for a very long time. Teachers' and principals' wages have been static for a very long time, over the past 10 years in effect. In real terms that is a pay cut of 15%. In the meantime, the expectations from the Education Training Inspectorate, the number of initiatives that are being sent out by the Department of Education and the Education Authority, the unreasonable process of transformation with the Education Authority, with very little consultation with schools as they try to progress and make changes, are making teaching and managing the school impossible.

Primary school teachers are dealing with classes of up to 34 children with no classroom assistants, and a range of cognitive ability in any aspect of development, including behaviour, of six or seven years from the most to the least stable child, in any area. The task is almost impossible. In fact, I feel the task is impossible and I have very serious concerns about the mental health of the professionals in the schools, and I would ask the inquiry to ask someone back home to investigate the mental health of principals. I know that the mental stress I am under in trying to run my school in the current context is like nothing I have experienced before in my life.

Q109 **Lady Hermon:** I am sorry; I am looking at your colleagues nodding in agreement. Deirdre, is that your experience as well, as a principal?

Deirdre Gillespie: As a principal, I have in excess of 80 teaching staff and similar numbers of teaching support staff, so around 170 staff solely responsible to me, as the principal, albeit through lines of delegation. I have to say that my staff would not be experiencing the same levels of stress as Graham has presented in his sector, but I believe that is because we have been able to manage our budget to offset various challenges that come our way. The picture is much bigger than an



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individual school; it is a sector issue. We have a fragmented system of education in Northern Ireland, which is far too costly. We have five competing sectors, duplication across the sectors, lack of co-operation and lack of co-ordination, and it is leading to the pressure pot of an unsustainable system.

We have financially and educationally unviable schools in Northern Ireland. We have far too many schools in Northern Ireland, and we are not able to release the money that we need for viable schools because we have not tackled the elephant in the room, which is around area-based planning. The sustainable schools policy is very clear. It outlines that an urban primary school should have a minimum of 140 pupils, and a rural one 105. A post-primary from 11 to 16 should have 500 pupils, with 100 in sixth form. Currently in Northern Ireland, we have 352 primary schools with an enrolment below 140, and we have 85 post-primary schools with an enrolment below 500, and no one is taking the decision to look strategically at the situation so that we can release money into schools that are viable, and that is the core issue. Unless someone undertakes a process of effective area-based planning for schools, we will always be tinkering around the edges. Any money we can save will not create the uplift that we need to transform our system.

Nigel Frith: I also wanted to add that, if we take a step back from everything that Deirdre has just been saying—my goodness, she put it perfectly; that is a beautiful description of what we are facing—if we also look at Northern Ireland in its journey towards peace, so far there has been some progress and we are delighted to see it, but there is such a long way to go. It is striking that only 7% of Catholic children currently attend controlled schools and something like 1% of Protestant children attend Catholic maintained schools. There is still a separation within our education system, which is not serving the pathway to peace in Northern Ireland either. This is both a funding crisis, but also a fundamental lack of vision for the future of Northern Ireland and the fact that we need to make our world and our society in Northern Ireland so much better than it is today.

Jo McColgan: I totally agree with Deirdre. If you were to ask the four principals, who all represent different types of schools, what the vision is for the education system in Northern Ireland, they would not be able to tell you.

Q110 **Lady Hermon:** Is that because we do not have leadership?

Jo McColgan: Nobody has had the strength of leadership to stand and say, "This is what we want our education system to look like. This is what it is going to be in 10, 20 or 30 years from now". Then at least we would all know what we are working towards, and then we can look at the nuts-and-bolts issues that will make that happen. You know our country very well, and the big politics and the minor politics that can come into play.



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This also goes along with the pay rise issue. As I said earlier, I believe education is about people. It is about people working together for the good of people, but what does it say to your staff if they cannot even get a 1% pay rise? That is a key issue that needs to be addressed and it requires strong leadership on all levels.

Q111 Lady Hermon: That takes me neatly into the question of how detrimental the absence of a functioning Assembly is and the lack of an Education Minister. We have not had an Assembly functioning since January 2017, which is unbelievable, and there is no sign of it being restored any time soon. Can I hear from you about the impact you feel that that absence has had?

Dr Gault: There are children in my community now who are looking for places in my nursery for September 2019 who, for their entire lives, have not had a functioning Government. I lament when I see the children in my school and look at the level of need. The level of political discourse that I look at back home is like something I would not accept in my playground.

Q112 Lady Hermon: Would you like to name names?

Dr Gault: No.

Lady Hermon: Not of the ones in the playground—in the political discourse, I meant.

Dr Gault: I am continually dissatisfied that many of our politicians from all sides back home play games. My children beg for a field of politics that is based on integrity, honesty and authenticity, and looks at their needs, rather than the needs of party politics and petty squabbles. I say to our politicians we have one chance for the children of my school. It is not an industry with a problem we can fix in five years; my children have one go and my politicians are playing pathetic games. I say to them: now is the time to be brave, to stand up and make some difficult decisions and step up for our children. I do not mind what issues people are arguing about, but the past is not relevant to the children of my school, who are dealing with complex learning needs and facing a system now that is almost Victorian in the level of financial provision I can make for those children. There is no more time for politicians to play pathetic games. My children need their help right now.

Lady Hermon: "Pathetic games" is a very strong phrase to use.

Q113 Chair: What I am getting, if I can interrupt for one moment, is that, because of the segregation that exists in Northern Ireland, we are paying a cost. There is a price attached to that. I will stand up for Catholic and Church of England schools in my very different constituency in the West Country, and I believe they do a very good job, but there comes a point, does there not, when what you refer to as politics intrudes into the proper disposition of the educational estate in Northern Ireland, which you have identified as being costly and diverting money from front-line



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education services to your young people? I am looking across the panel, because I suspect there might be a divergence of opinion in some of that. I am guessing, Nigel, you would heartily agree with that. Be very brief, because I am conscious that I have interrupted Lady Hermon.

Lady Hermon: It is alright.

Nigel Frith: Is that alright?

Lady Hermon: Of course; you are the witness. We want to hear from you.

Nigel Frith: Thanks very much. We are delighted to be heard today. You will have difficulty shutting us up in the end. I have no problems with schools of different types, with a distinct ethos, believing in what they are trying to do. We are all here today with a single voice, saying we want to do the best we can for our staff, students and communities. However, Northern Ireland is in a post-conflict phase where this segregation has an urgency to it that does not exist anywhere else in the UK. We need somehow to find a way towards reconciliation and peace and, even as we look at the wreckage around us of what has happened through the current generations, we need to help our young people to prepare to be the society of the future and the leaders of the future. My goodness, they want to do a better job than what they are seeing around us today.

Q114 **Chair:** There are two issues, are there not? There is integration and also the surplus places that presumably go with the kind of educational structure that we currently have in Northern Ireland. There are two elements to this. Deirdre, do you have any reflections on that?

Deirdre Gillespie: It comes down to parental and pupil choice as to the type of school that a young person would want to attend. While there is an appetite for integrated education, there is likewise an appetite for non-integrated education in Northern Ireland, if we are to be totally honest. We can meet somewhere in between. Perhaps shared education, as opposed to integrated education, is a way forward.

There are five sectors. Depending on which sector we go down, the grammar versus non-grammar route, the facts are most children want to go down a grammar route, regardless of whether it is integrated or not and regardless of your own background. There will be children from the opposite background who will go into a grammar school because it is a grammar school. Our system is based on selection, and that is an issue that needs to be addressed. It is on the back burner and has been for a number of years. You will find that grammar schools will be heavily oversubscribed and it will be non-grammar schools where places will be available. It is a bigger issue than integration; selection also kicks in.

Jo McColgan: I agree there has to be choice. I see it as a simpler issue that the vision is not clear, regardless of what that vision is. We do not know what it is. If we do not have an Executive and leadership at that level, how do we determine what we want our education system to look



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like? How do we know what we are working towards? If we do not have that, what will happen is we will become more insular, start to look at our own schools and environment, and make sure that we are ticking all the boxes of sustainability.

While being oversubscribed is the picture across Northern Ireland, I am principal of a school that was oversubscribed by 45% on first preference and is non-selective. It is all boys. That is a different approach again. In a lighter mood, there is one thing we are very good at in Northern Ireland. We excel at dividing things up and we have done lots of division.

Deirdre Gillespie: Jo has made the point on a few occasions about a lack of vision. I believe we have a vision for education in Northern Ireland, which is an estate of financially and educationally viable schools, which provide a range of different pathways, be they academic, vocational or somewhere in between. I believe the focus has to be much wider than just academic outcomes, but the difficulty is that we cannot take it to the next level because the decision-makers who will allow us to realise that vision do not exist. I believe we have a vision and know what we want. It needs to be tied to the economy, but it is blocked.

Dr Gault: To be fair to them, the Education Authority, the Department of Education and the three individuals who were sitting here last week are all working their hearts out for the sake of our children. There is no one individual in our system who is causing big problems. These poor people are operating within a political vacuum. The problem lies just beyond.

Nigel Frith: There is no discrepancy between the areas that Deirdre has just covered and the ones that I was covering. My belief is that we need a Department of Education that is offering every community a pathway to peace. Some communities may be ready for integrated education; some may not. Each community is on its own journey and it is a very painful journey. There is a lot of heartache still to be resolved, because of the things that have happened in the past. The Department should say to every community, "Would you like integrated education or quality shared education? It is an either/or. Let's go down one of these pathways, begin somewhere and begin the journey towards reconciliation". Now, that journey has begun, but I do not believe enough is being done.

I am not here today saying the only way to transform young people's values is through integrated education, even though I am a passionate believer in it. I also see that quality shared education is achieving some great things. What is unacceptable is the lack of vision to say it is an either/or, and we will resource either, whatever the community believes is right for them. Let us choose a pathway, and have the courage and vision to follow it. The vacuum in leadership and vision at the moment is wholly unacceptable, both financially but also from a moral perspective, in terms of the need for Northern Ireland to establish a new peaceful way of life.

Q115 **Lady Hermon:** It has been very interesting hearing the four different



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voices. I hope I am not building up false hopes, but I am quoting what the Chancellor said on Monday in his Budget. He announced £2 million extra to Northern Ireland and various other initiatives for Northern Ireland. Towards the end of his statement, the little bit that was about Northern Ireland, he also said, "We are also moving forward with schools projects in Northern Ireland worth £300 million, to increase the provision of shared and integrated cross-community education". If you were asked to identify the school projects that should have priority to move forward with that additional money, off the top of your head, would you provide us with the details of those projects?

Nigel Frith: There is a backlog of schools that have an urgent need for this kind of investment. The announcement from the Chancellor is extremely welcome. It is nowhere near enough, but it will do some good. The question of where exactly that money is going to go is in an arena well beyond ours, and I do not know which schools are going to benefit from that money.

Jo McColgan: The School Enhancement Programme is part of that. I can give a specific example from my own school context. We have three shared education partners, but the first partner that we established that relationship with was Mitchell House special school. We also have St Joseph's Primary School and St Joseph's post-primary school all within the local area, so all working together. We provide the meals at lunchtime for Mitchell House along with our own school. I give that as a very specific example. We were in for the School Enhancement Programme and we were rejected. We did not meet enough of the criteria to get a new canteen. Our canteen currently holds 160 people at a time. There are 766 boys in the school, not allowing for the meals that we have to provide for Mitchell House. The maximum number of pupils using the canteen on any given day is 230 boys. I have 349 pupils entitled to free school meals. The maximum number of boys from free school meals using it on a daily basis is 192. That basically means that, every day, somewhere between 157 and 189 of our free school meal pupils are not taking their meal.

We have had previous Education Ministers out to visit us. We have had Permanent Secretaries out. We have had local politicians from all levels, right up to Westminster. Everybody agrees we need a new canteen that is fit for purpose to provide the pupils with at least one healthy meal a day, including the significant numbers who are entitled to free school meals, yet we did not meet the criteria. I am hoping that some of that money will go towards providing the pupils with a fit-for-purpose canteen. Look at the impact that would have on their lives.

Can I quote my student council? Mitchell House student council and Ashfield Boys student council met the Permanent Secretary and this is what they said after the meeting, two weeks later, when we got the letter of rejection: "Sir, what do we have to do to get fed?" That is a direct quotation from my student council.



Lady Hermon: That is really upsetting.

Deirdre Gillespie: We are not quite sure of the detail of where that money will go but, in the past, through the School Enhancement Programme, a number of schools have benefited. Unlike Jo's, mine was one of them. We were able to secure £4.5 million for an extension and refurbishment, and a completely new music technology block. It has transformed what can be offered in my school, so I would support some of that money going towards furthering the estate of viable schools.

Likewise, we have engaged in shared education programmes probably for about eight years. In Magherafelt, there are five post-primary schools. Every sector is represented. At key stage 3, years 8 to 10, over that continuum of eight years, all of our children who have gone through those years of school have engaged in partnerships with children from a different background. It has been hugely successful. We have incurred funding for that, and looked at their identity and history.

There have been lots of different projects over the years, which have been successful. It means nothing to see uniforms from Magherafelt High School, which is a controlled centre, coming into my school. Likewise at sixth form my children go to Magherafelt High School to study A-level politics. That is just part and parcel of the culture that exists around shared education in Magherafelt, but it has been many years in the making. It is a result of trust that has built up among the principals, staff and subsequently children. Many friendships have now been born as a result of the initiatives that have been taken by our learning partnership.

Q116 **Lady Hermon:** Is the key trust between you?

Deirdre Gillespie: It is trust, confidence and initially just being aware of each other's identity. If you are going into a school and seeing emblems that do not necessarily chime with your background, have the confidence and courage to explore that. It has broken down a huge number of barriers in our schools, so much so that we now have joint student councils where they debate issues that are not the canteen—I am sorry—but issues in their community.

Lady Hermon: The canteen is important.

Deirdre Gillespie: I know it is important, but they are looking at issues in and around their communities, which is very positive.

Lady Hermon: I am sure my colleagues want to come in. We could continue this, as it is fascinating and very important.

Jo McColgan: Just before we move on, the work of the programmes at shared education level in our school is phenomenal. I would not want to paint a negative picture of that. There are hugely successful programmes with our three partners where we discuss many issues but, for the pupils in our school, the canteen is a real issue. We would like to move on, but we have many issues. I also love the dynamic of having a special school.



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We can see able-bodied children and disable-bodied children playing wheelchair basketball together, for example.

Jim Shannon: Lady and gentlemen, it is nice to have you here and thank you very much for coming. I declare an interest, as I am on the board of governors at Glastry College in my constituency, and I have been at that school for longer than I care to remember. My boys also went through that school. I would just say very gently, at the school where I sit on the board of governors, we have a very good shared education programme. I would say with respect that it probably leads the way for many across the whole of Northern Ireland. We have co-operation between the grammar schools, the secondary, the integrated schools, the Catholic controlled and maintained schools, and it works very well for a number of reasons. First, the principals have an agreed agenda that they pursue. They are supported by the board of governors and, ultimately, which is really important, by the community. It is driven from every level to try to make it happen.

The reason I say that—and because it has been mentioned I am going to refer to it—is that we have Protestants who go to Roman Catholic schools and Roman Catholics who go to Protestant schools. It is not something new, just to let you know that. It is something that has happened for many years in my constituency and I am very pleased that that is the sort of constituency we have. We have thriving education, and you will know that very well, Nigel. We have had a new primary school built, which is the second one to be built. Strangford College is doing extremely well and, at the same time, it is also in line to have a new building probably in the next few years. There are lots of things happening. I have knowledge of a number of School Enhancement Programme projects that are going to happen in my constituency. By the way, we have been waiting a year for it. It did not happen just like that, but we will have things happening.

Chair: I am going to press you for a question.

Q117 **Jim Shannon:** If you do not mind me saying, Mr Chairman, while it is okay to highlight the negatives, there are a lot of positives taking place and sometimes it is good to do that. Also, the educational achievements this year were exceptional. Every school in my constituency, and probably yours as well, excelled greatly. I want to ask you a question now, after saying that.

For us, personally speaking, and for other schools and principals who have contacted me, from all of the sectors, the issue for them is choice: do we keep the teacher on or do we enlarge the classes? With great respect—and I want to be respectful to the Education Authority and the Department of Education—I sometimes wonder why we wait ages for a reply on the position of the school and work to be done to the school. This happens not just in Glastry, but in many other schools across my constituency. I have a good relationship with the principals and try to keep that real. Can you give me some ideas? When it comes to your



relationship with the Education Authority and the Department of Education, could it be better? Could they be more responsive?

Nigel Frith: As I look at the Department of Education and the Education Authority, I do not want to sit this morning and criticise them. They are also overstretched and underfunded. They are full of good people who are trying their very best to do a good job for all of us and they understand the pressures we are facing. Derek Baker is the Permanent Secretary. John Collings, we all regret, has announced his retirement, but he is a man of massive integrity and we are seeing the best leadership they can provide in very trying circumstances. They are just as frustrated as we are. I think the relationship between us is good. Actually, we are all in the same boat and there are fundamental issues waiting to be resolved that are beyond their remit, just as they are beyond ours.

Dr Gault: Last week, the Education Committee answered a similar question, and said that it did not feel that, in the process of transformation, they had lost any significant areas of service. I would say, on behalf of the primary sector, that that is partly true. There are 850 members of staff who I believe have left the Education Authority, and there has been a big loss of intellectual capacity and experience. While we have not lost any key areas of service, we have definitely lost capacity. I would not criticise any individual from the Education Authority. For example—and I know we will talk about special needs soon—the psychologist who comes to work with me, the statementing officer and their whole team are outstanding individuals working within what I believe is a broken system. Our relationships with the individuals within the Education Authority and Department of Education are good. We are all working for the good of our children, but within a system that is unsustainable.

Q118 **Jim Shannon:** I want to ask another question in relation to teachers. We often find when it comes to teachers, in particular primary school teachers, that there are more teachers looking for jobs than there are jobs available. It is important to bring the point up. It is nice to see, Graham, that you represent some 400 schools, I think you said in your introduction. Therefore, what I am going to say is probably a question for you. How do we make sure that the teachers who are looking for jobs here, and looking for permanent jobs, not temporary fill-in jobs by the way—I know that gives you an educational opportunity to learn—do not go across the water? My sister is an example of that. She went across the water, because that is where the jobs were. At the end of the day, I am wondering how we can retain some of the teachers and get a better gender balance across primary school teachers.

Dr Gault: We heard last week, to my amazement, Mr Goodwill ask the Education Authority about the pay scales that principals and heads of department are on. Wow, if principals, heads of department and teachers in your constituency are earning what you suggest, the four of us will be heading over this way as well.



Lady Hermon: I think you had better correct that: you might be tempted to head over.

Dr Gault: I would be tempted to. That is one aspect; the pay differential between our professional pay scales back home and here is significant. That is one attraction for a young teacher. If I were graduating now, I would be very attracted to leave, unfortunately, for a number of reasons and pay is one of them.

Secondly, primary schools are being faced with an impossible situation. The only way for a school like mine to make savings now, because I have cut everything—I have parents providing me with soap—is to lose staff, but there is no one. Primary schools do not have librarians or admin staff in the way post-primaries do. There is no one to lose. This year I have made a saving, which I have been reluctant to make, by having my special needs teacher teach full time in a classroom and having my learning support provided by an excellent and very capable classroom assistant. I have also cut the hours of learning support for my most vulnerable children. If we were properly funded, I would have a teaching position for a special needs teacher, as well as that teacher in the classroom. I do not think there are too few teaching positions; there is too little money to provide the positions that need to be filled. We cannot afford to fill them.

Q119 **Jim Shannon:** To follow on from that, there is another question I want to ask about classroom assistants. There is not a week when I do not have to write to the Education Authority about pupils who have particular educational challenges. What we need is more one-to-one, rather than one-to-three or one-to-five. More often than not it is about assessment. I do not want to be critical, but just focus on the facts. It is how we can ensure that those classroom assistants are in place to help those pupils. That is special educational needs. Probably all four of you will have an opinion on this, so I want to get answers from all four sectors. In special educational needs, there is definitely a greater need today than I have ever seen in my lifetime, as an elected representative.

You mentioned this, Nigel, but it applies to everyone. Figures came out this week on Monday, and I made the point in a debate yesterday, that on the mainland there is a 50% increase in the number of students and pupils with mental health issues. In Northern Ireland, the figure that was mentioned on Monday that I retained for this question-and-answer thing was 10,000. With those enormous additional pressures on education, for special needs, which are greater than ever, and for mental needs, which are greater than ever, I understand it is horrendously difficult to cope, but give us your thoughts about where we could do something.

Mr Goodwill: Could I tack on to your question? In England, we have moved from statements to EHC plans, which have been widely welcomed. In fact, I was a Minister when we finished off doing them. Maybe you could also cover whether it would be an idea to do that in Northern Ireland.



Deirdre Gillespie: There are more and more children presenting in our schools with special educational needs. We cover emotional, which includes the mental issues that youngsters are presenting with, and behavioural needs. I have had a 110% increase in the number of young people who are presenting with special educational needs in my school over a five-year period. That is extremely challenging, because many of them are below the threshold that would trigger additional help. It means that my staff and other children in the class are having to manage children with a host of barriers to learning.

The striking thing over the last number of years is that they are becoming younger and younger. It used to be an issue that would have sat around years 12, 13 and 14. It is now year 8. In fact, we have 47 feeder primary schools and I visit each primary school twice a year, and the primary school principals are saying that children as young as four, five and six are presenting with emotional and behavioural issues. It is a very difficult situation to manage. In a school like mine, the profile of the young people has changed dramatically in a short period of time, with no additional funding or support from anywhere.

Recently, our pastoral teams have begun engaging in 30-hour mental health and emotional support counselling training programme to equip them, because they are finding themselves very vulnerable when young people present as young as 11 or 12 with self-harming issues and suicidal threats. They are just not equipped for those sorts of issues. They have never been equipped or trained to deal with them. We now have a programme of support for 12 staff, who are then going to cascade that out, but we have had to fund that ourselves, because there is no support in the system for it whatsoever.

Dr Gault: Across the whole cohort of primary school principals, there is a perception of an agenda within the Education Authority to have fewer statemented children. Particularly in the region where I am, the south-eastern region, there are more statemented children per head of the population than in England. Who knows what the causes for that are? It could be to do with the trauma of our very difficult past. Who knows? I just know that the statistics are irrelevant to the child in my school who is presenting, on their first day at nursery, with complex needs.

The statementing process is unwieldy and very long. Last week, I asked a parent of an autistic child how long it took before the first referral to the production of her statement, and she prepared a little document, which I will leave you with today—66 weeks was the answer. During that period of time, that parent and family were dealing with a lot of emotional difficulty, going through that process, but so too were the staff who were managing the child without a statement of need being implemented.

I will also add that, increasingly in year 1 and nursery, right across the Province, schools are finding that children are presenting on their first day with very complex needs that have not been diagnosed or even



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identified. In some cases, I find that I am the first person in a parent's experience to break some very difficult news to them about the possibility of complex needs in their child. I am asking this question: where are the health visitors? I know that health visitors visit between the age of two and two and a half, but that particular department has cut that provision way back, so they have one visit at around two, two and a half, and then maybe follow it up with a phone call before school. I am having parents bringing their children to school with no awareness of the very complex needs that their children have. Because they have no diagnosis or statement in place by the time they hit nursery or year 1, I am trying to scrape together some money to keep that child safe for the 66 weeks that it might take to have a statement of need in place.

Deirdre Gillespie: It goes to show the disjoint between education and health in our system. In England, they would have an educational health plan, where the two agencies join together to try to overcome the barriers. We have an educational plan and then input from health, but they do not match. There is a complete inefficiency in that system, not just financially but in the care of the child.

Jo McColgan: In my school, 40% of our population is on the SEN register. Of those pupils, 10% are at stage 5. I would like to cover something from earlier about relationships with DE and EA. We have a very good relationship with both. I would endorse them being in a similar position, in that the funding that was quoted when they were over here was of a £233 million reduction in real terms, over the last five or six years. That has to have an impact.

One of the areas where I have an excellent relationship with them, because I have to, is with the SEN department in the Education Authority. It was slightly better when it was the Education and Library Board, but that was just because it was local people who fully understood the context of my school. The lady who was there has since been promoted, but it is still very good.

Through some additional funding, we have developed focused programmes for our boys. We have literacy and numeracy intervention specialists. We have just developed a nurture provision to deal with pupils who are transferring from primary into post-primary who have those emotional dependency needs, are not quite ready for big school and may have underlying issues that are not necessarily literacy and numeracy-based. We have a development proposal in waiting, which we have been working on with the Education Authority, to develop ASD provision and a learning support centre. That would see four specialist teachers developed and trained to work in that area, along with six highly trained learning support assistants, but that is in the pipeline and has not come through yet.

I would also say that we work very closely with the community in the EastSide Learning partnership through the SIF, Social Investment Fund.



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We also work very closely with our feeder primary schools. Some of our feeder primary schools that use reciprocal reading techniques have trained our staff and specialists in the same techniques, so there is continuation for the pupils in the style of teaching and learning, but also in the specialist area. Those collaborative partnerships have been very helpful, but like all of my colleagues I strongly believe it goes back to the same issue. We need more funding to support that level of work, and mental health is increasingly becoming a problem area, almost exponentially.

Nigel Frith: The figures quoted on Monday were linked to a BBC documentary, which was shown on Monday evening in Northern Ireland on BBC One. My school was one of the schools featured in that documentary. What we were trying to say through our part in the documentary was that there are things that can be done to help young people with mental health problems; it does not have to be this way. The documentary showed quite positively one of the strategies that we are trying to run, which is called the Hopeful Minds programme. It draws on research that shows that hope can be defined—it is not pink and fluffy—and can be taught. Skills and strategies can be taught to children while they are still in a relatively good frame of mind, which we would hope mean that they do not end up needing counselling and in a crisis.

There is work to be done within school. I believe that positive mental health, hope and resilience should be new subjects on the curriculum. Our teachers should be trained in how to deliver those programmes. I also believe that our staff are insufficiently trained. We have two key roles in schools today. One is to teach and promote learning, and exam results and exam performance come with that, but the other is to look after our children. We are very well trained in how to achieve the first goal. We are not trained nearly well enough in how to deliver the second. We all have statutory child protection training on an annual basis, but we do not have suicide awareness training. We do not have training that enables us to deliver positive mental health strategies to our children.

Schools are doing individual things. We are networking with each other. I am saying, "Graham, what are you doing? Deirdre, what are you doing?" We are listening to one another and we are drawing on one another, but what is missing is an overall coherent strategy that has vision and purpose, and which is funded and resourced. The reality is that our teachers and classroom assistants in the classroom every day are often the first people to notice that that child has a mental health problem or this child is showing signs of anxiety. We are not yet well equipped enough to know what to do then. First, it is about how to hear what a child is not telling you. What is between the lines? What are they hinting at and what do we do then?

The gap that Deirdre mentioned between the worlds of health and education is inexcusable. We need a strategy where those are working together. Yes, we have counsellors coming into school, not many but at



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least we have something. Graham, I am sorry. We invest additional funding from a budget that cannot afford it into additional counselling provision every week, so that we have two full days of counselling. Only half a day of that is paid for by the Education Authority. In addition, we have a need for new programmes and provision. I want to see an occupational therapist assigned to my school, coming in one day a week, working with groups of children to make sure that they never need a counsellor. It is the preventative work that keeps them away from the cliff edge. This is a yawning need in our system today.

Jim Shannon: Part of the problem to the panel is this: it is not just education because, within education, you also have disabilities and health issues. That is where my knowledge comes from, because people come to me looking for benefit assistance, which I help with, and then I find out more about their complex needs. You are clear about having education and health working together. I suggest this to you, not to reply to because I am conscious the Chairman is looking at me: in terms of the extra money we secured from the Conservative Party—confidence and supply—that is where the money should be.

Q120 **Maria Caulfield:** Wherever you go in the UK, school funding is a huge issue. It certainly is in my constituency. The difference between the rest of the UK and Northern Ireland is, when head teachers come and see me and tell me exactly the same issues they are facing, about making savings, making teachers redundant and SEN provision, I am able to go and see a Minister and lobby on their behalf. In my area, we have secured additional funding. If you speak to my head teachers they will say it is not enough, but we are making some progress.

I do not want to repeat the points that Lady Hermon has made about not having an Assembly, but MLAs are still in existence. I think we have all been moved by your testimony today, your experience and the impact it is having on teachers and children. Are there meetings going on with local MLAs and are they making representations on your behalf, despite there not being an Assembly?

Deirdre Gillespie: There are meetings going on with MLAs, at different levels and on different issues, but the fundamental issue is that only 61% of the DE resource budget is going straight to schools. Some 39% of our budget is held centrally. You can lobby MPs or MLAs as much as you like, but that is the basic fact and that is very different from other regions of the UK, where 90% is going directly to schools and 10% is held centrally. That is a huge block. That 39% that is held centrally needs to be reviewed immediately.

Q121 **Maria Caulfield:** Why is that not being released? Would an Assembly need to make that decision?

Deirdre Gillespie: Absolutely it would. Some 32% goes to EA and the remaining 7% is used for other ring-fenced, earmarked funding. The bottom line is that only 61% of the DE budget is going directly to schools.



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That needs to be reviewed immediately, along with area-based planning. Our school system is totally unsustainable. To go back to the point, MLAs will agree with us that we need more money, but there are fundamental structural situations in Northern Ireland and, unless they are addressed—and they can only be addressed by an Assembly—things will not change.

Q122 Maria Caulfield: Graham, you talked very passionately about there being a political vacuum and it being the responsibility of all politicians to get back around the table and get an Assembly functioning. You meet with MLAs but, if they are not part of the Executive, then they cannot make those decisions. Do you not push them to say, “We need a functioning Assembly”, as well as lobbying for the money?

Dr Gault: Jeffrey Donaldson is an MLA of mine and has been a real friend to my school. I have to say he has shown a real, genuine and honest interest in the well-being of the children in my school, but the nature of our politics is polarised and divided. This is not about Jeffrey Donaldson or about any individual, but any politician who I speak to back home will have someone else to blame. The whole context that we work within is so polarised and divided that it is very difficult to function.

I have to say that Jeffrey Donaldson has been a real friend of the school and has given good guidance. We have been seeking a development proposal, because we are heavily oversubscribed, and he has been very useful to me. He has been useful to the parents, particularly of children with additional learning needs, but the context in which we are functioning is much bigger than one MLA. It requires Jeffrey Donaldson’s party and the other parties back home to push aside the minor issues that Stormont has collapsed over to sit down.

Maria Caulfield: On an individual basis MLAs are quite supportive, but you need them collectively.

Deirdre Gillespie: There is also an issue around a local MLA making decisions at a local level, because it will be a vote-catcher or otherwise. If they are going to close a small school, it will impact their position and they will not grasp the nettle. We have 150 small schools in Northern Ireland, which service 6,000 pupils. It costs around £40 million to sustain those schools. No one, a local MLA or otherwise, will make that decision, because it might affect their position detrimentally, and that is the bottom line in Northern Ireland. It is because we are running down a system of party politics.

Q123 Maria Caulfield: That applies not just to Northern Ireland. I have had rural schools in my constituency close and it is a very difficult decision for a politician to justify. We are going through a process of a fairer funding formula in England, which will try to redress the balance between rural schools that have been traditionally underfunded and schools in urban areas. The funding formula may be reviewed in Northern Ireland and a new formula put on the table. Does the current formula help those disadvantaged areas or does it need to be completely reconfigured? Is it



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working for anyone?

Dr Gault: There is a great deal of research that shows that very significant levels of input and impact on a child's educational attainment arise from factors that are outside of a school—the social capital in the background of a child. When we had a functioning Stormont, we had a Minister of Communities, a health service and a Department of Education. What I am experiencing, and I am speaking just on behalf of my own school, which is not in a particularly socially disadvantaged area, is that huge amounts of funding are being invested in schools to try to offset deficits that exist in wider society.

On the current funding formula, there is no one sitting here and no principal back home who would disagree with targeting the social need agenda. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds need all the support that we can give them as a society, but the current distribution of funding uses free school meals, which is a very blunt measure of need, to distribute money. The disparity in funding between schools with very few free school meals and schools with a large number of free schools meals is very significant. I would argue that, in educational terms, a child is a child and that money needs to be distributed more equitably.

Jo McColgan: I get approximately £221,000 for social deprivation. Almost 50% of my pupils are entitled to free school meals. Of them, 63% live in the top 19 SOAs. That is the highest percentage for any school that side of the Lagan and beyond. It works out at £299 per pupil.

I go back to what Deirdre has said: we need to look at the centrally held money of the 39% or 40%. It is the point I made at the start. On average, in England there is £5,870 per pupil. At best, we have £4,400 and, as Graham has said, just under £2,000 at the primary-school level. We looked at issues such as procurement; maintenance is another issue. There are areas where savings could be made. At an SEN level, there could be more direct involvement with the individual school on where that money can be channelled to meet the needs of those particular pupils. Across the country, we could save money, which would give us a higher return per pupil. That would make us all able to have a more even playing field, in my opinion.

Deirdre Gillespie: Sir Robert Salisbury carried out an independent review of the common formula funding back in 2013, and made a raft of very sensible recommendations, which would transform how we would draw down our funding. That needs to be revisited immediately and implemented, so there is a fair and equitable system of funding within Northern Ireland.

Maria Caulfield: The work has been done.

Deirdre Gillespie: The work has been done. It just has not been implemented.



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Jo McColgan: I would endorse that and agree with it 100%.

Nigel Frith: If I am honest, and this is the hand grenade into the discussion this morning, I do not want the old Stormont back. I want a new Stormont with a new will and a new vision to work together in ways that they did not. I did not see a power-sharing Executive; I saw a power-grabbing Executive. I am sorry if I have offended anyone who is listening to this broadcast today when I say that, but I think that is the reality.

If they cannot agree to power-share properly, I would rather that the civil servants at the head of our different Government Departments were given greater powers to make decisions for themselves and, I daresay, without any political bias. We need a real rethink politically about the way Northern Ireland is run. I do not think what we had before the Executive collapsed was anywhere near good enough.

Q124 **Maria Caulfield:** That is an interesting viewpoint. Jim touched on this just before in his questions; there is supposed to be some extra funding coming from the confidence-and-supply arrangement. Is that trickling down at all?

Deirdre Gillespie: I am not aware of it, but I would say that, if it has not, it needs to be used not on a sectoral basis but on a systems basis, to bring about a programme of transformation of our education system. It needs to be more efficient. Release funds to where the funds need to go. The bottom line is that is to meet the needs of young people, so they have a high-quality educational experience in our schools.

Dr Gault: There needs to be an uplift of about 10% in the primary sector immediately. I am quite confident that my school has not seen any confidence-and-supply money meeting anything near my children's needs. I do not think any of it has appeared in my budget. Transformation is required. Transformation of our political system is required but, right now, immediately, on Monday, when I start back after this half-term break, I need 10% more in my budget to make it work.

Q125 **Maria Caulfield:** You need that money as an immediate uplift, but also a wider structural fund.

Dr Gault: I need it immediately, yes.

Deirdre Gillespie: I can speak for myself and maybe for others around deficits. There has been a host of schools now that, last year, were not running in deficit and are now running in deficit. The deficit level is very high currently and we cannot address that. There are no more cuts that we can make within our system. The only cut that we can make will be through staff, which will affect the quality of teaching and learning, which in turn will affect the education outcomes of our schools. We need transformation of the system, which will release money back into the system to schools that are viable, to allow them to do the job that they are employed to do.



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Jo McColgan: There is one other area I would add. I fully support everything that has been said. From my own notes, restructuring is key and moving centralised funding to the schools. That is where we can make the biggest and most significant impact. I also urge that we end the industrial action in Northern Ireland, because I believe it is having an impact on schools. I go back to the earlier point about what it says to your staff if they cannot even have a 1% pay rise. I would ask that real negotiation takes place there to end the industrial action.

Nigel Frith: I echo everything that has been said. We have brought to you a united voice as principals this morning to say we cannot afford to run our schools. We are hugely frustrated—Graham used the word “humiliated”—that we cannot meet the needs of our children in the way that we know is right for them. We have also acknowledged the elephant in the room, which is the need for a complete transformation of the education system in Northern Ireland. At best, we tickle that elephant. It is time someone led it in the right direction, but we also need a major investment, for the sake of Northern Ireland in its path to peace, in both shared and integrated education.

Deirdre Gillespie: Can I make a point on the rising deficits of budgets in schools? In four years, we have gone from 217 schools showing a deficit to 390 this year. That has gone from £16.8 million of a deficit back in 2013 to £47 million of a deficit in our system currently. On average, schools are carrying a deficit of £120,000. That is three or four teachers who have to be cut.

Dr Gault: The projections for the next three years are horrific.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to draw it to a close now. We have kept you for a long time. You have been exceptionally good witnesses, if I may say so. It was extremely interactive and we are really grateful for everything you have said. You have been very frank with us, which is what we wanted from you. Thank you very much indeed. What you have said has been taken down and will be analysed closely by our clerks. It will certainly inform the report when we come to write it. Thank you very much indeed for being with us today.