

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Funding priorities in the 2018-19 Budget: Education, HC 1497

Wednesday 5 December 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 December 2018.

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Members present: Dr Andrew Murrison (Chair); Gregory Campbell; Lady Hermon; Kate Hoey; Mr Robert Goodwill; John Grogan; Nigel Mills; Ian Paisley; Jim Shannon.

Questions 126 - 206

Witnesses

I: Gerry Campbell, Chief Executive, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; Tony McCusker, Chair, Finance and Personnel Committee, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; Barry Mulholland, Chief Executive, Controlled Schools' Support Council; Heather Murray, Board Member, Controlled Schools' Support Council and Principal, Millington Primary School.

II: Nuala O'Neill, Chief Executive, Governing Bodies Association; Sir Gerry Loughran, Vice Chairman, Governing Bodies Association; Roisin Marshall, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; Diane McDowell, NICIE Representative, Department for Education Local Management of Schools Funding Committee and Bursar, Hazelwood Integrated Primary School.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Council for Catholic Maintained Schools](#)
- [Controlled Schools Support Council](#)
- [Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education](#)
- [Governing Bodies Association](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gerry Campbell, Tony McCusker, Barry Mulholland and Heather Murray.

Q126 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. It is great to see you here. Thanks for coming such a long way to be with us today. We as a Committee are interested in public services in Northern Ireland, which is a slight departure since of course these matters are devolved and would not normally fall within the purview of this Committee, but with things being what they are at Stormont, we have been interpreting our role and our remit broadly, particularly since the budget has now been set. Of course, that budget is made up of elements largely from the public service. We feel we have a licence to take a broad view of the management of public services within Northern Ireland. That is part of the piece of work on which we are engaged at the moment. What you have to say will very much help us inform and colour our report when it is published in the not too distant future.

I wonder if I can start by welcoming you here today and asking you very briefly—unfortunately time is very short, so brevity is very much a virtue today—to describe the organisations from which you have come today and then we will launch into some questions.

Gerry Campbell: Thank you very much, Chair. I am delighted to be here this morning to give evidence to the Committee. I am chief executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which is the employing authority for approximately 6,500 teachers in Catholic maintained schools. We have 450 Catholic maintained schools across the nursery, primary and post-primary sector. There are in the region of 79,000 primary children and under 40,000 post-primary children educated in our schools right across Northern Ireland. We have been in existence since the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order and work very much in collaboration and partnership with colleagues in the Education Authority and other sectoral bodies across the education environment.

Barry Mulholland: My name is Barry Mulholland. I am the chief executive of the Controlled Schools' Support Council. It is a recently formed body that has been set up as a voluntary organisation to represent the interests of controlled schools in Northern Ireland. The controlled sector in Northern Ireland is made up of 559 schools, which represents 48% of the schools in Northern Ireland across all of the ranges, from nursery schools to primary schools, post-primary schools, both non-selective and grammar schools, and special schools. Within that, we also have 27 integrated schools and two Irish-medium schools.



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The sector is very often referred to either as a state secular sector or as a Protestant sector. Both of those are inaccurate. In terms of the controlled sector, first of all from a religious perspective, its make-up is about 65% Protestant, 10% Catholic, 18% of no religion and 7% other religions—a variety of religions across Northern Ireland. In terms of the make-up of the organisation, it covers everything from newcomer children coming in. 36% of all newcomer children in Northern Ireland attend controlled schools. It has 8,500 teachers within the sector and 142,000 pupils.

Q127 Chair: Thank you. That is a very good introduction. Can I start by saying, on a very positive note, that education in Northern Ireland does appear to be delivering the goods? I have been particularly interested in the 2013 OECD report, which I think was encouraging, and more recent statistics from the Education Authority, which suggest to me that children are doing well. That means that the quality of education is good in Northern Ireland, but there is clearly no room for complacency. In 2016, we had the Shared Education Act, which is an interesting piece of legislation. I wonder about the extent to which you think the intent of that piece of legislation is being rolled out, what more you think needs to be done in transforming the way education is delivered in Northern Ireland and what structural roadblocks still exist. Mr Campbell, would you like to have a stab at that one?

Gerry Campbell: In relation to the Catholic maintained sector, one of the rationales or *raison d'être* of setting up the organisation in the first instance was about raising standards and tackling educational underachievement. That is something over the past nearly 30 years that has been successful across the maintained sector in terms of driving educational attainment, improving outcomes and raising standards for children right across our schools.

I would also put to the Committee that Catholic education is not just for people from the Catholic faith. Yes, there is a strong distinct religious philosophy that encapsulates and underpins Catholic schools but they are inclusive by nature and support children of all faiths, not only those from the Catholic or Christian tradition. In terms of parental choice, parents over the past 30 years and beyond have continued to invest their confidence in Catholic schools because of the ethos of the schools and the overall success in improving outcomes, preparing young people for the challenges of life, not only giving the opportunity to succeed academically and be successful in that vein, but also preparing them more broadly as young people making an impact on life. We also support the spiritual and societal development of the young person on a very well-rounded basis.

From an inclusive perspective, certainly some of our schools in the Catholic maintained sector would have a much broader representation across different Christian faiths and none. In relation to shared education, we in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools support the Department in terms of driving forward shared education and supporting



and facilitating that. The big challenge that faces schools and the education environment at the moment is the slowness of the pace of capital investment across not only shared education but transformation in general. In the past 10 years, 45 schools have been removed, for want of a better word, from the Catholic maintained sector in terms of primary schools and post-primary schools. They have been closed or amalgamated as part of reorganisation. One of the things that really is a big, big challenge for the overall transformation is that the capital investment is not running concurrently alongside and parallel with the reorganisation of schools and amalgamations, et cetera.

The big challenge for not only CCMS but other education bodies is when we are trying to bring forward transformation. In whatever guise that is, you have to win the hearts and minds of the communities, the parents, political partners and everybody who would have a vested interest in a particular school. Part of the deal in selling that would be, even if you can present that vision of a future school where the education is not going to be as good as it is but even better, if the building and the capital investment is not there, that makes it very, very challenging. Feedback that we get within CCMS from schools that have been through a reorganisation or transformation process is, "Yes, it was challenging and we have come through it, but the disappointment is we have not had the new school that was initially envisaged when we made the leap of faith", or the building still required significant capital investment at minor works level but also at major works level.

Q128 Chair: Do you think that is partly to do with the desire to reduce the number of surplus places in schools?

Gerry Campbell: Obviously transformation and reorganisation removes a number of empty school desks out of the system. That continues to happen as we speak at the moment, and that is something that will continue to take place. Some schools just need to be right-sized. They may have had, for example, 1,000 pupils 20 or 25 years ago. The demographics or the local population may have changed. The school needs to be right-sized so it fits the numbers who can actually come into the school.

In terms of transformation, much more transformation needs to take place right across education. CCMS as an organisation is up for that. We are up for working with the Department and our other sectoral colleagues right across the whole environment, and with political representatives as well, because it has to happen. The big challenge at the moment is that there is a significant lack of capital investment. It is slowly moving as well. There just seems to be delays and problems in-built in moving it forward.

Tony McCusker: On the question of shared education, one of the many advantages of shared education is that it increases the potential to deliver the Entitlement Framework amongst schools. That has been a big advantage and has actually encouraged schools into shared education



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arrangements. The CCMS has very clearly embraced that approach, particularly in rural areas where delivering the Entitlement Framework is a challenge to all schools.

Barry Mulholland: From a controlled perspective, as I outlined we are very proud of the inclusive nature of the controlled sector. In terms of shared education, we are really proud that the vast majority, if not all, of our schools are engaged in shared education programmes with other schools. In terms of the actual sector, the sector is very proud of its ethos. The controlled sector sees itself as a group or collection of schools that are dedicated to getting the best outcomes for children within the context of non-denominational Christian values and principles, but schools that are open to children of all faiths and none. In terms of that inclusivity, look at the nature of the sector, the naturally organic integrated schools that exist, like Sion Mills, in Strabane and Ballykelly where schools have come with populations that are naturally integrated. In terms of percentages, they are probably better than any formally integrated school within Northern Ireland and the formally transformed integrated schools, of which there were 27.

When it comes to the discussions that have taken place around area planning and the Entitlement Framework, we have post-primary schools that are saying to us that if it was not for the shared nature of their work with Catholic maintained schools or voluntary grammar schools within their area, they would not be able to offer the breadth of curriculum that they are currently offering. They are totally committed to the whole notion of shared education.

When it comes to area planning, it is critical that the transformation processes in terms of area planning are matched very closely with capital investment. There is no sense in two schools coming together to form one new school and then find itself sitting there for 10 years on a split site, accruing deficits, when it has actually committed to coming together as one new school. There needs to be alignment of policies within Northern Ireland in the context of shared education and area planning. What we are here to talk about for the most part today is the financial challenges that are being faced.

Q129 **Chair:** In terms of the surplus places issue, that obviously touches particularly on smaller schools. Many of those will be primary schools. I wonder, Heather, if you have any experience of what that means in practice. I know as a politician, I have experience of what it means in practice trying to deal with some of the unpopular decisions that have to be made. Of course, at the moment that is a challenge without an Executive, but I wonder whether you can just describe what actually it means in practice.

Heather Murray: In answer to your question, I do not really have a direct answer because I am principal of a very large town school in an area of social deprivation, so most of my decisions that impact on the health and wellbeing of the staff and myself are to do with the funding



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crisis. Because of the funding crisis that is in our schools in Northern Ireland, we are having to make decisions based on the cost of education, rather than what we truly believe is the value of education, as already has been said, in developing the whole children.

For instance, on a very simple level, I had to make a decision not to turn the heat on until November in our school because of a wee bit of hardship. I feel our schools are moving back in time. I remember my father telling me stories in the past about walking to school carrying his turf. He is turning 80 next year. Is that what we want for our schools in the future?

I am having to make decisions on things like reducing the staffing—non-teaching staffing and teaching staffing—which has a very direct impact on the children's learning. For example, an assistant caretaker in a school like ours is retiring at Christmas. I cannot replace him. Again, you are thinking, "Why not, in a big school like that?" It is money, again. What does that mean for me? It means that during the day for two hours there is no caretaker in the school. Who is going to clean up if a child is sick? Who is going to meet the delivery men at the door or the service men for the deliveries that come in? It is probably myself, which takes me away from my main duty of teaching and learning.

We have fantastic schemes in schools that try to enhance people's life chances, like Accelerated Reader. I hope you have heard of it. We identify children when they are aged five and six if they are struggling with reading, maybe because of home circumstances or different reasons. We put in an intensive staff support programme, one-to-one, for those children when they are P3 and P4, which is five to seven. Then we are an Accelerated Reading school where all children, 300 of them, from P5 to P7, show gains in their reading, from investment in books and staff to work one-to-one with them. 96% of the children in our school in a socially deprived area are showing advances in their reading ages because of investment that the staff can make into their education.

Do you want me to go on? Class sizes are getting bigger. I will come back to it.

Chair: I am going to bring Kate Hoey in very briefly because I think you wanted to come in on this.

Q130 **Kate Hoey:** I am a product of the wonderful Northern Ireland education system and I still think it is the best education in the whole of the United Kingdom. I am interested because both Mr Campbell and Mr Mulholland talked about it not being a Catholic education as such, and similarly you talked about Protestants but there were people from all denominations. Can you be very clear with me? It seems to me that integrated education gets a huge amount of publicity, a huge amount of support at establishment level and it seems to me—maybe I am wrong—a huge amount of extra money. A child, for example, who goes past a state school and goes to a grammar school will not get their bus fare paid but if



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they go on further to an integrated school, they will. I just wanted to check that, because certainly my experience of some of the grammar schools and controlled schools is that, by osmosis and by what they are doing, they are becoming integrated, and yet the integrated sector is treated in a very different way, as if that was where the funding has to go. I wondered whether they get much more money than perhaps one of your maintained Catholic schools or one of your maintained state schools.

Gerry Campbell: I would use the word “inclusive”. When I talk about Catholic maintained schools, I would use the word “inclusive” as opposed to integrated, because it is inclusive and it happens naturally. There are some schools that are much more inclusive in terms of the religious breakdown than others, but that depends on where the school are located, because Catholic schools are very much tied in with the local community. “Inclusive” would be the word I would emphasise in terms of the Catholic maintained education. As I said before, there is a philosophy of Catholic education that understands how schools deliver the education curriculum. There is a strong ethos. Certainly parents who continually choose schools to send their young children to—to go to primary and to post-primary—are very clear that they value the strength of an ethos. That has been very clear within the school. Ultimately, that supports the big emphasis within Catholic maintained schools in terms of raising standards, delivering educational outcomes and tackling underachievement.

Again, in terms of partnership work, my colleagues talk about partnership work and delivering the Entitlement Framework, and that is something that happens quite naturally, because schools are very keen to deliver the best possible educational curriculum for all of their young people. If that means that they cannot deliver all the subjects within the Entitlement Framework naturally, they will build strong relationships with fellow schools, whether that be in the integrated sector, grammar sector, controlled sector or whatever, to ensure that the progression pathways are there for young people. They can get the best possible education to make the best possible choices for their longer-term career.

Tony McCusker: Can I add to Gerry’s point? Essentially all schools are on the common funding formula. Support for schools is the same across the sectors. Where there would be a perception in terms of inequality is that there is more available in terms of capital development for integrated schools than there is for other schools. More recently in terms of refreshing the amount of money that was allocated, there would be a perception that there is more capital going in. That is open to a wide gulf, but the important thing here is that people need to be careful that financing of education is based on need and that no child is disadvantaged by virtue of the choice their parents make. That is the critical thing.

Barry Mulholland: Absolutely. I would want to build on that. In terms of funding going to schools—revenue streams—they are much the same.



They are based on an average per capita. The concern that controlled schools would have would centre around things like duplication of provision, where a new school is opening up in competition with another school when a controlled school has a fairly good balance in terms of the representation coming into the school. I have cited Strabane, Sion Mills and Ballykenny in respect of that. There was a great welcoming of capital investment in integrated and shared education there in the past few weeks. It is absolutely fantastic to see capital investment coming into the school estate in Northern Ireland, but the deployment of that investment has to be based on objective need. You cannot have one sector having state-of-the-art schools and another sector having children educated in squalor. Under the equality legislation in Northern Ireland and human rights, that should not be the case. I am sure that any investment of capital in Northern Ireland will be based on objective need—based on what schools and pupils need.

Q131 **Kate Hoey:** In other words, where it is needed.

Barry Mulholland: Absolutely, rather than a particular sector, be it my sector or any other sector. Any investment should be based on objective need. With regard to the issue of surplus places, I have been in education a long time and there has been a lot of publicity around surplus places in schools and the thousands of empty desks. I have yet to go into a school and see classrooms of empty desks. They are being used for a special educational need or that space is being used for some other education purpose. Also, the figure needs to be accurate. I attended a school within the southern region that was not eligible for the School Enhancement Programme because it had a school population of 400 but the enrolment was 500. When I went into that school, you could not get another child into it. It was full to capacity but it had been denied access to the School Enhancement Programme because it was 25% undersubscribed. We found out four mobiles had been removed from that site 10 or 12 years ago but the enrolment had not been addressed through a DP.

A pilot programme is currently being developed by the Department of Education. It is a really important one. That is about identifying schools where it is a no-brainer—the square footage of the school has reduced, the enrolment of the school has reduced but was never changed—to rapidly right-size the enrolment of schools. The other issue is that in the last two or three years there is a wave coming up through the primary schools, particularly into post-primary schools, of additional pupils. There were 2,000 extra pupils in the system last year. That hit schools hard, because when it came to the establishment of the AWPU there was the same quantum of money to be divided amongst a greater number of pupils, resulting in the allocation per primary school going down by £56 per head and for post-primary going down by something in the region of £26 per head.

Chair: We will come back to that.



Q132 Jim Shannon: First of all, ladies and gentlemen, it is nice to have you here. Can I say quickly—and I say this with all honesty because we do have a very good working relationship within our schools in the constituency that I represent, Strangford—how well we work together through the three different sectors of schools? For instance, Catholic controlled, integrated and state schools all work together.

I declare an interest, Mr Chairman. I should have done that right at the beginning. I am on the board of governors at Glashury College in my constituency. We work with all of them to provide the education, because we cannot do it individually as schools; we have to do it collectively. I just wanted to say that works very well, and it works well because all three people are committed to it.

On Monday past, I had the opportunity to meet the National Association of Head Teachers. They have given me very clear questions. I will not have the time, Chairman, on your instructions, to ask the questions I want to ask but I would just ask this one question collectively, if I can. It is very clear, from what they told me on Monday, that they are at an absolute crisis point. They have held on by the skin of their teeth until now. The education budget has reduced by 10% in the last five years, and school numbers have increased by 2.5% approximately.

The Education Authority has failed, with respect to them, to really make contact with the school principals, with the schools and with the board of governors to address the issues of short funding. 60%, for instance, of money for the overall educational budget comes directly. 40% is retained centrally. It causes real problems for schools when it comes to balancing the books. On top of that, they do not and they fail to contact the principals and schools. Indeed, I understand only 12 principals of schools have been contacted in relation to the findings of the key report. That poses a great question: just how much are the Education Authority in touch with the schools to ensure that funding happens? What would you like to see happening in relation to that?

The other question to add on, if I can, is about the fact that I am informed that we have 1,400 vacancies for teachers and classroom assistants across all of the sectors of education. My goodness me. How come there are 1,400 vacancies? I put it to you—and you will answer this question, hopefully—that it is because the budget has not been provided to ensure those 1,400 vacancies are filled when they should be and the schools that we represent are continuously telling us how underfunded they are. Crisis point—is that where we are?

Barry Mulholland: I would love to be able to identify who to blame. It would be great if I could say, "It is EA's fault" or, "It is the Department of Education's fault". Truth be told, there is not enough money in the education budget. The Department does not have enough to give to schools. The Department does not have enough to give to the Education Authority. The Education Authority does not have enough in order to run the services the way they would want to run the services in support of schools. I am talking to principals who are having to make awful



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decisions in terms of the running of their schools and reductions in terms of their teaching workforce and their non-teaching workforce. They are having to make curricular choices that they would not have dreamed of having to make within the last five years. It is all hitting the wall now.

The Department of Education has made it very clear. From 2010-11 until now, there has been a cut in real terms, in terms of the education budget, of £233 million or £234 million. That takes into account that schools are having to operate on the same sorts of budgets over the last five or six years but have to take an additional hit in terms of pensions, national insurance contributions and the apprenticeship levy, all coming to an additional £70 million per year, with no increase whatsoever in terms of the per capita they are getting to run their schools. As a matter of fact, in 2010-11, the per capita figure was something like £3,785. This year it is £3,755 or £3,765. There is an actual drop of £10 per capita on average across the Northern Ireland school system.

With regard to the 60-40, I am all for more autonomy in our schools and greater decision-making by the boards of governors and the principals but that 60-40 is more complex than that. 60% is going out to the schools. The 40% that is retained has to cover everything from the C2K infrastructure that is going out through all of the schools. It has to cover special schools. It has to cover £81 million for transport. No principal would want to make a decision as to who gets or who does not get a bus allocation. It is not just as simple as 60% goes to the schools or 40% is held centrally and the schools want that 40%. There is scope to look at this.

Heather Murray: In saying that, there does need to be more money for early intervention for primary schools and for nursery schools, because we all know that if we put the money into children earlier, if we help at the very early building blocks of their education, they should not need as much later on, bearing in mind that post-primaries still need the money that they need. As Barry says, the whole education system needs more money. You mentioned that we are verging on crisis. We are at rock bottom.

There is stress in our schools. Somebody mentioned high standards in our Northern Ireland schooling system. That is because people like myself—and I am speaking collectively for primary school principals and principals in Northern Ireland—are doing our utmost. We are staying awake at night. We are up early in the mornings trying to compensate for decisions that we know are going to impact on children's lives and staff's lives, but it is causing huge stress. The system just needs more money.

Gerry Campbell: It is a perfect storm, Jim, because, as my colleagues have explained, there is less money in the system over the past eight or nine years. At that same time, the challenges have increased. There are more and more young people who are presenting with additional



challenges, whether that be speech and language, emotional health and wellbeing or mental health issues. There are also the rising costs, as colleagues have explained, in terms of national insurance and the fixed costs rising over that period, with pension contributions and the apprenticeship levy, et cetera.

However, throughout that period I want to pay my commendation to the staff and to leaders of schools. They have continued to put their shoulder to the wheel. Standards and outcomes have continued to rise over that period. The investment that the individual teaching staff and leaders within our schools and governors continue to play to drive forward the improvements in educational standards for all of our young people is tremendous, but it is a breaking point because teachers and leaders within schools in many ways have a dilemma. Often 90% and beyond of their whole budget is spent on the teaching staff. If you want to be able to deliver as broad and balanced and as economically rich a curriculum as possible for children and young people in that area, you have to have teachers who can deliver the subjects.

Tony McCusker: The other thing you need to think clearly about is all of us have surveyed our schools in terms of the impacts of budgets on it, and the core issue coming out of all of that is the impact on people who are disadvantaged, children who are disadvantaged and children with special educational needs. Those are the sectors that, when you drive budgets down, tend to get less attention. That would be a travesty, given the success and the progress that has been made in those sectors. They would suffer as a result of these particular cuts because the schools try to hold on to a core education provision. There just is not the capacity to deal with that. All the responses in all of the sectors have illustrated that quite clearly.

Q133 **Jim Shannon:** Only 20% of children are statemented within the correct time, which goes back to your point—and I think the point of all four of you, by the way—in relation to special educational needs. It is a growing concern, and there would not be a week in my constituency where I am not referring somebody to a psychologist for an educational statement to be done. I understand there might be other methods that have been put forward as a suggestion. It is about solutions, Mr Chairman, not just about highlighting the issues.

I understand that if skills could directly procure services, such as access to an educational psychologist, waiting times for assessment could be reduced and money could be saved. That is what has been put forward to me as a suggestion. I think it is probably a suggestion that you will feel is a good idea. Is that another way of making the system work better and be cost effective?

Gerry Campbell: Schools would come back and say they are frustrated by their inability to be able to procure X, Y and Z, whether that be even in terms of special educational needs and how long it can be to get a



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young person statemented and the challenges that are enveloped within there.

Even looking at a higher level, one thing we need to be more proactive and better at across Northern Ireland is for all of our Government Departments to work closer together. We have made a step forward where we have a draft programme for Government, which is moving away from a silo-based approach. It is much more outcomes-based. We need that approach right across Government, because it has to work for the children and young people themselves, because they need to be getting the services much quicker. That will help the schools, the teachers and the leaders within schools, because it is challenging enough dealing with all the issues you have in educating people and making sure they have the best opportunity in life, but at this moment in time it has probably never been more difficult to be a teacher, and certainly a head teacher or leader within a school, given the myriad of difficulties that are out there.

Barry Mulholland: The transformation process needs to look at all of this and look at it in great detail, but that does not take away from the fundamental issue. The trajectory in terms of school budgets is crashing. We have 446 schools in deficit this year and it is rising. For the first time ever, the amount in deficit across all of our schools exceeds the amount in surplus, and it is crashing. EA, on the other hand, is a single organisation that has lost hundreds of staff, and it is expected to deliver the sorts of services that you have. It has not the capacity, because it has not the budget. Even if you took what EA has at the minute and disbursed it among the schools, it is doubtful whether there is enough money to actually run the type of service you are talking about. There is just not enough money in the system at this time.

Heather Murray: Because we do not have access to those services in the chalk face, if you like, in the schools, we are having to look outside. I am having to use money again from the budget to pay for a learning mentor to work with our children. I can afford one day a week. I have to make the decision of which children are going to benefit from that, when I could really use her all week.

We look to charities in the local community to come in and work with children with challenging circumstances at home and mental health issues. In the past, schools did a lot. We still do a lot of work for charities but now we are nearly becoming a charity. We are looking out; we are looking for people to help us with our children in the school.

Chair: That message has come across loud and clear.

Q134 **Mr Campbell:** I wanted to concentrate on two areas. One was following up on what Barry has just said. Maybe you do not have these figures; if you do not, could you supply them? In terms of the deficit versus the surplus, you have told us what the stark nature of the current position is. How has that changed, say, in three years? Three years ago, was it



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radically different, or has it been declining gently in the past two or three years? I just want to get a handle on it. If it is going downhill, how rapidly is it going down?

Barry Mulholland: It is accelerating. In the submission that we put to the Committee, based on the projections that have been presented by EA, you can see the trajectory is just going downhill in both amounts. We do not have the figures for 2018-19 but there is nothing surer than that more schools are going to go into deficit this year and that surplus is going to reduce even further.

Heather Murray: There is a perception that schools like mine that have got TSN money—targeting social need money—are better off. I am going into deficit. We are going into an increasing deficit, if that is the right terminology. We are in difficulties and we are perceived as being the schools that have the biggest budgets.

Barry Mulholland: I met a principal last week. He is in a school of more than 1,200 pupils. This is a school that has never been in deficit in its life. It has a greater teacher-pupil ratio than the Northern Ireland average, and for the first time it will hit deficit next year. If we were talking about tens of schools in Northern Ireland, you could say there was an issue there in terms of mismanagement, but look at the number of schools we are talking about that are currently in deficit—and the number is growing. I do not even know if, on a three-year forecast, any school has been shown to be still in surplus.

Gerry Campbell: We can come back with some information in relation to that, but I would agree with what my colleagues have said. The pace of the slide down is increasing. Within the Catholic maintained sector, we provide a multidisciplinary support to our schools. We have schools that have excellent numbers of pupils. They are full to the guilders. They are running the school, from a financial perspective, very effectively and efficiently. However, they are now moving into a situation where they are in deficit. Principals and governors work in co-operation with ourselves to examine what other actions or interventions a school can take.

Mr Campbell: Maybe explain what “full to the guilders” is.

Gerry Campbell: It is a colloquialism from back in Northern Ireland.

Heather Murray: Bursting at the seams.

Gerry Campbell: Bursting at the seams. When schools are in that position, they are looking to see what can be done. The situation can be big because they obviously have three-year financial plans. For some schools, they can see maybe coming out of deficit maybe in year 2 or year 3, but there are other schools where the situation is going to get even more difficult. That is with the school being full with the amount of pupils coming through and continuing to deliver very positive educational



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outcomes. What we do as a sector—and are other colleagues in EA and the other statutory planning authority will do—is work with schools where the situation is really beyond retrievable. There are schools where the numbers are just not there. The trends of enrolments are not going to increase any further over the next number of years and the financial situation is such that it really is beyond retrievable.

We also take into consideration what the educational outcomes are with children as well. That is a big challenge in its own right. We will probably talk about area planning but when we go to take forward transformation for even closing a small school, that can be difficult. You have to win the community round. You have to actually work with educational representatives because obviously we are working under Government policy but in the bigger scheme of things, there are just some schools that are beyond turning around. There are other schools where the numbers are good and all the other factors should indicate that the school should be in a surplus position but, given where we are, they are not. That is extremely worrying when you see now for the first time the greater number of deficits compared to surpluses. Deficits outstrip surpluses across the whole system.

Q135 Mr Campbell: The only other question I had was on the capital budget that you touched on earlier. I will be cautious, Chairman, because I do not want this to turn into a sector competition for capital budgets. Nobody wants that. Indeed, I was at a very successful shared school project in my constituency a few weeks ago, in Limavady, which I am sure Barry knows about and most people do know. It is very successfully and very naturally integrated and is going to benefit from the announcement that you alluded to. Where you get the schools—particularly small rural schools—that are coming together and possibly amalgamating, are there any problems there where they are seen not to be recipients of the capital budget to the same extent as other schools are?

Tony McCusker: In smaller schools, it is difficult. First of all, it is difficult to get smaller schools to co-operate to the extent that they will rationalise. As Barry was saying earlier, it is about having the capital resources to make that happen, because quite often you have to move to a different site or a new school. If you cannot actually do that then you are in difficult in trying to persuade people that the new arrangement will be much superior to the old arrangement. That is one of the problems that has come up in the Education Authority briefing, has come up in controlled schools and probably others: that unless you have the capital wherewithal to make the rationalisation and efficiencies, it will be very, very difficult to make happen.

Gerry Campbell: It has to be allocated against need, right across all the systems in Northern Ireland and where the need is. If there is a rationalisation of schools, there is a clear indication there that capital investment should support that. In many ways, when you are



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transforming a school, if there are two or three schools amalgamating together, you are really bringing along the communities. You are developing hearts and minds that they are all part of the process, because what will make them work is if communities that are involved in the schools buy into the process and see that the outcome will be a better future for the longer term, for the education of all the children and young people. When you see that, when you see that manifesting, where there has been a school that has been developed—and in the early days there may have been opposition that you had to work your way through and bring people with you—when you see the outcome of the new building, what it can do and the fantastic facilities for the children and young people, and the teachers, leaders and governors in the school all delighted around it, they are the positive things where you see transformation working really positively.

Tony McCusker: Where it is not possible to provide new capability in terms of rationalisation, one of the initiatives we have been looking at is the whole process of joint management of schools. We have a significant number of teaching principals in small rural schools that are extraordinarily complex and very, very difficult to manage, because at one level they have to carry out the full role of being a principal and all the requirements of paperwork and so forth associated with that, but still actually teach in the school. What we have been looking at is the whole idea of bringing together a number of schools under a single management with a single principal, thereby getting efficiencies of operation but also maintaining the schools in the locations when you cannot actually move towards a single site.

Barry Mulholland: In terms of amalgamations, area planning and schools coming together and committing to a new future, if that is not complemented with the investment required to make that a reality, it is not just unfair to the school in question but it does not form a good model for other schools. I know one school where four different schools amalgamated into one school, and they were promised a new school on a site in 2004. The hope is they will break the sod within the next six months. That is 14 years waiting on a school.

I have another school, Strabane Academy, which was the coming together of two schools—a grammar school and a high school—into a new type of school. It has amassed a deficit of over £1 million because it had to live on a split site four miles apart, the only saving being the principal. When schools have the courage to come together and create a new school, that needs to be backed by investment. That makes that a reality. I have to say that both of those schools, at the time at which they put forward that they were amalgamating, needed capital investment then.

Q136 **Mr Campbell:** The Chancellor came over and made a multimillion pound announcement. It sounds to me like he needs to come back again.

Barry Mulholland: Absolutely.



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Tony McCusker: Chair, you made the point about the Education Authority and the whole notion of “spend to save”. That was your reference to them. That is exactly what is required. You do need to invest to save money in the long term.

Q137 **Mr Goodwill:** I want to clarify that situation a little bit. I understand when schools are amalgamating and you are eliminating surplus places, if not surplus space in the school, as we have heard, but is it the case that it would be difficult, if two schools are amalgamating coming from the different religious traditions, if that amalgamation was to take place on one site? Is it easier if you have a brand new site where you have a neutral third location? Is that slightly different to the situation we have had elsewhere?

Barry Mulholland: The situations I am talking about would have new sites. On one, for Strabane, the new site is within the grounds of one of the schools. On the other, the new site is two miles up the road on a greenfield site.

Q138 **Mr Goodwill:** It is easier to sell that to the parents where they see they are not being taken over by another school, whichever way that may be. That is why the case is stronger for capital investment in new schools on new sites or investment.

Barry Mulholland: Absolutely. I would say the parents in both those situations believed that the coming together of their schools was going to create a new school. They thought that within the educational lifetime of their children that that new school was going to be there. I have to say that in one of those schools, they were coming from three outlying towns, which were more than 10 miles away. That is a major issue in terms of rurality in Northern Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: That is absolutely clear. Thank you for that.

Barry Mulholland: Involving the stakeholders, the parents, is so important, as you say, because Gerry has already said that you need to buy their hearts and minds. All parents want the best for their children and if you are going to show them a new school on a new site that is going to benefit their children, they will buy into it.

Gerry Campbell: Parents have to understand the reason why there is change. There are many different reasons for change. It is not all driven by finances. It is not all driven by enrolment numbers. There also have to be other factors taken into consideration as well. Ultimately, the child—the pupil—has to be at the centre of whatever decisions of transformation are made, so that the educational outcomes can continue to be achievable for our children and they get the best possible education that they can.

Barry Mulholland: Our principals and our teachers in the controlled sector—and I know it is the same within the Catholic maintained sector—are working above the call. The results they are getting in the schools



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are phenomenal. We talked about the children of the bottom end. You see when you look at what our schools are doing, how they are addressing those issues and starting to turn that around. It is absolutely fantastic in terms of the quality of teaching and learning. Northern Ireland's future depends on a well-qualified workforce in a world-class environment, because it is not about manufacturing anymore. It is going to be about the knowledge economy. We need to ensure our children are equipped for that future. The only way we are going to do that is with quality schools and continuing to invest in quality teaching and learning.

Gerry Campbell: There needs to be interventions at the right time. It is important that nobody is left behind. If we are going to grow a fair and equitable society, and a prosperous society, and grow the economy over the next 10, 15, 20 years and beyond, we need to have buy in and input from everybody, so that everybody can contribute to that and education is the lever and the driver to help to transform society and transform our economy. That does require some investment but intervention at as early a stage as possible. My colleague mentioned about investing to save. That will save money in the longer term.

Q139 **Mr Goodwill:** Could I ask you a question about the funding formula? In England, we got ourselves into all sorts of trouble because everyone accepted we had an unfair funding formula, but when we moved to what was generally seen as a fairer system we created winners and losers. You have a funding formula system where I think 73% is made up of the age weighted pupil units. Could that funding formula be improved? For example, would that help children on free school meals, children in rural areas or would you say that it is not perfect but it is not worth trying to mend it?

Barry Mulholland: Without doubt, our principals are telling us that this common formula needs to be refined. If you are asking me how to do that, all I can tell you is to bring the experts into the room, ensure that whatever the unit value is to run a school, regardless of the circumstances of the children and TSN, et cetera, that basic unit is sufficient. When you then look at addressing the additional pressures, appropriately fund that but get the per capita unit right in the first instance.

Q140 **Mr Goodwill:** Who is losing out? Is it the rural schools, or children with special needs?

Heather Murray: Primaries are definitely losing out in the age weighted formula funding, but we do not want to take away from other sectors of the education system. We just want to be properly funded, so that, as Gerry and Barry said, the interventions are there at the first stage of the child's education, in nursery schools and primary schools. As I tried to describe, there are reading programmes we have. We want to keep those things in place and keep all those programmes in place that we already have, so that children get the best outcomes.



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Q141 **Mr Goodwill:** It sounds like you want to create winners but compensate the losers so that they do not lose out.

Tony McCusker: Everybody agrees that the formula for funding schools has to be addressed. Everybody has agreed that because there are distortions in it now that are causing problems. The other thing, in doing that, is you have to look at all the add-ons that are associated with that because they can add to the distortions in terms of some schools and their finance. You can find that some schools are in a very healthy position, mainly because of the added funds they get for certain reasons. In the round, the funding of schools need to be addressed. There may well be winners and losers at the end of it but everybody is agreed that it needs to be addressed.

Gerry Campbell: Part of the issue is that if you think of it from a primary school perspective, if money is not there to intervene to support those young children who present with additional needs or special educational needs, and those issues, whether they be numeracy or literacy, for example, are not properly supported or addressed, that carries right beyond primary school into post-primary. We miss a trick as a society if we have not helped to address and mitigate those challenges at an earlier stage. Ultimately, there is the knock-on effect that can have in terms of life chances and progression pathways into potential careers for young people. Ultimately, addressing that leads to building a stronger, more prosperous economy. If you think about it, it makes sense.

Q142 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you very much indeed for coming to give us evidence here this morning. We really do appreciate it. I have a series of question, in no particular order. You have described very passionately the crisis in funding within all of your schools. Given the crisis that we have and the dire financial circumstances in which some schools find themselves, could you describe how that impacts on the children in your schools? How are they suffering as a result of the financial crisis in our schools?

Heather Murray: The children very much are suffering in our schools. I have tried to describe the reading programme. We have 26% special needs in our school. We have one dedicated special needs teacher. Because of the cost to the budget, that special needs teacher has to be used to cover other things in school, so she is being pulled away from her main work. We have rising class sizes. I have 15 classes that have over 33 children in every class. Obviously we are trying to promote strategies like active learning. That is how children learn best. When our class sizes are rising like that, children cannot learn in the best way. They do not have the space. Teachers do not have the resources. They become more and more tired. Our curriculum has been narrowed. As somebody has already referred to, that development of the whole child is so important.



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If I asked any of you what you remember about your primary school days, it is probably not what you did in the classroom; it is probably the school trips or your time on the stage. It is all the extracurricular things that made you the people you are and brought you to your place in society. We are beginning to have to pare those back for our children because we are going right back to the core curricular subjects. It is crucial they remain in place, particularly in an area like ours where there is disadvantage. Our parents cannot afford private swimming lessons. They cannot afford private music lessons for the pupils. We have another project called new skill pathways where 200 children in P5 and P6 all freely get a musical instrument. You can imagine the benefits: practising, keeping in time, working in a group. All of those qualities they are learning outside of the normal curriculum are being added onto the local curriculum. That is all under pressure. Those are decisions that are coming back to us, and I am going to have to take that away from those children because of the funding crisis in our schools.

Barry Mulholland: At post-primary level, you are getting the same sort of impact in terms of teacher-pupil ratios and reduction in the curricular offer. The Entitlement Framework is an aspiration now in many schools. The number of courses is only facilitated through good shared education working with other post-primary schools. It is impacting significantly.

Q143 **Lady Hermon:** You are confirming that children are suffering in our classrooms today.

Barry Mulholland: Most definitely.

Q144 **Lady Hermon:** Is that the same in CCMS?

Gerry Campbell: I would concur with that and my colleagues. As part of developing our evidence for the inquiry, we went out and engaged and surveyed our schools, particularly in terms of the impact that finances are having on them. In terms of things like the curriculum, 93% of our 450 schools indicate they find themselves now making decisions on the basis of cost as opposed to from a pastoral and academic perspective. 76% of our schools indicate that there is additional pressure on the extracurricular activities, as Heather has mentioned. Also, in relation to the delivery of the subjects and Entitlement Framework, particularly Key Stage 4 and post-16, there is additional pressure there in terms of being able to deliver the wide variety of subjects on offer.

What supports that is the engagement that schools have across the various sectors in terms of delivering on an area-based solution to deliver the subjects. That requires that co-operation and partnership across schools. There is no doubt about it that the financial challenges continue to bite extremely hard at local level within schools.

Q145 **Lady Hermon:** In the absence of a functioning Assembly, schools are suffering, children are suffering and teachers are suffering.



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Gerry Campbell: As a society, we do need an Executive back. We need a Minister back. If we had a local Minister for education, he or she could make local decisions. That being said, what we said this morning already is that the pot of money is not enough. We know all those challenges but what we are lacking is that strategic direction from a Minister, he or she being in place, working as part of a functioning Executive, able to make decisions not only within the short term but plan for the medium and longer term as well. We would all agree that it is essential we get an Executive back as soon as possible.

Q146 **Lady Hermon:** Do you feel the absence of leadership and of vision for education in Northern Ireland, in the absence of a Minister?

Tony McCusker: You need policy decisions and policy change and there is no framework to achieve that now. I have one point in terms of impact. What worries me greatly is for all schools across the sectors there are two areas they are saying impact greatly: children at risk are not getting the services that they need, and children with special educational needs are not getting the services they need. That is creating a legacy of children without any serious educational achievement at the end of their period in full-time education. That would be a really sad outcome for those children.

Q147 **Lady Hermon:** It is a shameful situation that we find ourselves in. Can I come to targeting social need? Is that formula working at all or has it seen its best days?

Heather Murray: It is working in some respects because I am probably one of the last group of schools to go into deficit with my budget, but I just cannot live within the allocated budget anymore, however hard I try, without further putting our children into detrimental situations. The targeting social need money is, as has been said, for children who are disadvantaged and communities that are disadvantaged. As I have said already, we have 26% special needs in our school. We have 20 children on statements. We have 80 children at stage 3 of the code of practice, waiting to see whether they need statements. As somebody has already referred to, that process is so slow and unwieldy. Those decisions have to be made at school level in how we support those children within the school in this financial situation that is becoming harder and harder. EA are doing their best, but they do not have the services either for us to access, so the children are losing out. It is a crisis.

Q148 **Lady Hermon:** Has the formula seen its best days? Should targeting social need be changed?

Heather Murray: I still think there is a need for funding for those children who are most vulnerable in our society.

Barry Mulholland: That has to be looked at in the round. People have to appreciate just how difficult the situation is, and it will be exacerbated by the current situation with regard to our staff. Our staff did not get a pay rise since the year before last. They are in industrial action at this



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time. There has to be a settlement. In the interest of education, there has to be a settlement of that in the near future. Northern Ireland pay policy last year would have had settlements for the public sector around 1%. We will say that the teachers will have to get around 1% for last year, though that is not over the line at this time. It has to have a settlement for this year.

In England, the settlement was above 3%, though that is complex in itself because it was more for the lower-paid teachers than it was for those well up the scale. Let us say there is going to be a settlement, and I could have a trade union shouting at me because it is not enough at 3% or I could have management shouting at me because it is too much. 3% would be an extra £30 million that schools will have to find, because what was made clear is that you can negotiate above the 1% but you have to find it from within the existing resource. Our schools just do not have another 3%. Another £30 million will really put this over the line. That money needs to come into the education system.

Tony McCusker: Can I add one thing on the targeting social need issue? In a sense, the impact of that essentially is measured by the improvement in performance from children who are entitled to free school meals. That is the metric you use for measuring disadvantage. That has shown a steady increase over the years. From that perspective, it is seen to be working. A stronger argument could be made that it is not increasing quickly enough. Children who are disadvantaged and entitled to free school meals in all schools are well behind their peers. That has to be a significant issue. The other issue we should think about in the longer term is that boys still consistently underperform in comparison to girls, by significant amounts, and we are not actually making any great inroads into that.

Gerry Campbell: That gap between boys and girls in Catholic maintained schools is 11.5%.

Q149 **Lady Hermon:** Could I move you on to the point that Mr Mulholland has mentioned? That is the industrial action. CCMS is an employer. You employ your staff. You said right at the very beginning you have 6,500 members of staff. How is the CCMS proposing to resolve the industrial action and to award a pay rise to your staff?

Gerry Campbell: I sit on the management side along with colleagues from the Education Authority and the Department of Education. There have been protracted negotiations over the past number of months. These negotiations are around issues such as workload, accountability and obviously pay. We are at a juncture at this moment—the Committee will appreciate the sensitivity in relation to this—where we are hopefully moving towards a proposed resolution of that.

Q150 **Lady Hermon:** Will there be good news before Christmas?



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Gerry Campbell: I am afraid I cannot be Santa Claus today and confirm that. What we need and what the system needs is a protracted period of industrial peace. We need a solution here that everybody can buy into, not only on the management side but the trade union side as well. We need a fair deal and one that will be affordable within the system as well, because at this stage we are aware there is no new money coming in. The only way that we can put forward a financial settlement that will get the trade unions off industrial action will be something that will be funded through efficiencies and savings within the system.

There are challenges inbuilt within that, in relation to that, but what we are striving for is to reach a settlement that delivers a period of industrial peace that everybody can buy into. That is a challenge. It is challenging but I do believe with a fair wind of engagement we can get there. There are challenges because we operate within public sector pay policy, which is 1%. Any money above that has to be found through efficiencies. We are trying. We are doing our very best and I am hopeful we can reach some level of solution early into 2019.

Q151 **Lady Hermon:** I have one last question. Mr Mulholland, earlier in your evidence you made a very stark assertion that there was a division between those schools that seem to be doing very well financially and getting a good chunk of the money and other children who were educated in squalor; it was those words that struck. You did not really mean that.

Barry Mulholland: No, the point I am making is that any investment in capital investment in schools has to be on the basis of objective need. There is no sense building schools for this group of schools when you look at the quality of the accommodation in other schools that are sustainable. You cannot ignore the schools that need.

Q152 **Lady Hermon:** Yes, but you can confirm we do not have children who are being brought up in squalor.

Tony McCusker: We have children in very, very poor conditions.

Barry Mulholland: They are very, very poor conditions. Bear in mind that maintenance has only been operating at a health and safety level for many, many years now, with very little capital investment. The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Education and Training Inspectorate talk about the very poor conditions of schools.¹

Heather Murray: For instance, Millington Primary School does not have a big enough hall to deliver our PE curriculum.

Barry Mulholland: Conditions are very, very bad.

Q153 **John Grogan:** I acknowledge you graphically painted a picture of the

¹ Written clarification from the CSSC 17/12/2018: "This should refer to the Education and Training Inspectorate only."



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pressures on revenue spending. One of my predictions for 2019 is that the Chancellor will be on the plane again at some point in the year announcing capital spending. The difference with school funding in England is stark and has been referred to in terms of the amount that is held at the centre. What are schools telling you about that? No doubt there are very good reasons, as you said, and every penny is well spent, but are you not under pressure from schools to perhaps halve the amount you hold, which would still be a lot more than is held in England?

Barry Mulholland: Schools are very interested in that other 40%. They are very interested in terms of what elements of that could be better used within the school. There has to be a process of looking at that but it is not as simple as the whole 40% should go to schools, because you have transport costs, free school meal costs, et cetera.

Q154 **John Grogan:** Can I ask for another opinion?

Heather Murray: I would concur with that entirely, as I have been trying to say. I am very much on the coal face. I am the out-working of the system. What I am experiencing every day is a lack of funding in our schools, and a funding crisis.

Q155 **John Grogan:** You would not want to control more that is controlled at the centre now.

Heather Murray: I would like to control a little more, so I would, but I appreciate that with control comes more difficult decisions.

Q156 **Chair:** What about special needs funding? That is of course very much controlled from the centre at the moment.

Heather Murray: The whole of special needs has to be looked at in great detail. Some sort of transformation needs to take place. Our children are being short-changed. It is too unwieldy and too bureaucratic. As somebody mentioned earlier, in terms of the educational psychologists, there is either not enough of them or the statements are not coming through the system fast enough. They are being held up at EA level in bureaucracy. There are all sorts of things happening. We do not have the external support services that the children need in schools. The whole thing needs to be looked at. Whether we could manage it ourselves from money from our budget, we could have a go at it but it needs centralised help as well.

Gerry Campbell: You are getting the message this morning that there could be quick fixes done in a number of areas but ultimately what we require is radical transformation. That radical transformation would ultimately need to be led by a Minister.

Chair: It all comes back to that.

Gerry Campbell: Someone that will fix it and invest in education for the long term.



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Barry Mulholland: I have one final point in terms of SEN and special schools, of which there are 39, 37 of which are controlled. They are partially delegated budgets. The funding regime for special schools needs to be looked at.

Q157 **Mr Goodwill:** In England, we have moved away from statements to EHC plans, which have been widely welcomed right across the sector and by parents. You would need a political decision-maker to do that in Northern Ireland.

Tony McCusker: The statement in itself brings resources. We do not have the statement. You are still dealing with the issues of children with SEN but you do not have the resources to help the teaching staff deal with it.

Chair: Folks, thank you ever so much. I am sorry, we have to move on because we have another panel and we are packing everyone in today. We are really grateful to you for coming today. You have been very interactive and extremely useful.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nuala O'Neill, Sir Gerry Loughran, Roisin Marshall and Diane McDowell.

Q158 **Chair:** Good morning. Thank you so much for coming as the second of our panels this morning. You have been watching from the back so you pretty much know the score. Hopefully, we will be able to cut through a lot of questions today. You appreciate the time limit and I repeat my encouragement to my colleagues to keep their questions focused and concise so that we can get through the material. Before coming to questions, perhaps I might ask you very briefly to describe who you are and where you are coming from, for the benefit of those who may be watching at home.

Nuala O'Neill: My name is Nuala O'Neill and I am the chief executive of the Governing Bodies Association. We are the representative body for the 50 voluntary grammar schools across Northern Ireland. Our member schools provide a first-class education, a variety of extracurricular activities and extra pastoral support to over 48,000 young people, which is about a third of all post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland. Our schools are amongst the largest in the education estate. We have a proud tradition of building cross-community links in education, drawing members from Catholic and non-denominational sectors. Our schools welcome people from all faiths and none. Many are regarded to be super-mixed in terms of religious breakdown of their pupils.



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We welcome the Committee's invitation to attend today. Voluntary grammar schools, like all other education sectors, are having to make extremely difficult choices in the context of declining budgets.

Roisin Marshall: Hello. My name is Roisin Marshall. I am the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. Our mission is to promote reconciliation through integrated education in a divided society in Northern Ireland. We have 65 integrated schools, which equates to about 23,000 pupils being educated in the current year. That has been over a period of 35 years. Quite a number of children have been through integrated education.

Diane McDowell: Good morning. My name is Diane McDowell. I am the administrator in Hazelwood Integrated Primary School, one of the oldest grant-maintained integrated primary schools in Northern Ireland. We are situated in north Belfast, in an area of high social need and we run two classes from nursery through to primary 7. We have a total enrolment of around 460.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Chairman, I am the support act here. I am the vice-chairman of the Governing Bodies Association. I am the nominated member of the voluntary grammar schools on the Education Authority, so I will listen with some interest to comments.

Q159 **Lady Hermon:** It is very good of you to come today because it means you probably had to travel over last night to be here early in the morning, so we do appreciate you coming here. Could we start with the integrated sector? In what we know to be very challenging and dire financial circumstances at the present time, in the integrated sector are you able to retain your staff at the numbers that you would wish to retain them? How has the funding crisis impacted on the integrated sector?

Roisin Marshall: As you have just heard in the last hour, all schools are impacted by the budget cuts. Of course, most of your resource allocation goes on your staffing costs. You need to have teachers in front of classes. Therefore, they are doing their best to retain their teaching staff but other staff may be lost along the way. As we know, budget cuts are increasingly impacting on the school budgets. Grant-maintained integrated education schools have to manage their own budgets; therefore, they cannot go into deficit. Therefore, they have to use staffing cuts in order to manage the budget.

Q160 **Lady Hermon:** Do you have numbers of staff, including support staff, that you have lost in the last two years? Let us go from the collapse of the Assembly in January of last year. We have not had an Education Minister for almost two years. There is no light at the end of that very depressing tunnel. We will not see an Assembly, or even talks, this side of April next year, apparently. In those circumstances, could you give us an indication in the last two years of the numbers of staff that you have lost in the integrated sector?



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Roisin Marshall: I cannot answer that question. It is a very good question. It is something I should find out. Perhaps Diane could come in in terms of a particular school.

Diane McDowell: In our school what we have experienced is we have reduced our level of support in special needs. You have to have a teacher in front of the class first, so where we had two full-time teachers working in that area we now have one. The other area—our colleagues in the previous session alluded to it too—is early intervention in the nursery school. It is so important. It is putting someone alongside a child to whom school is an alien environment; they have never been it in before and some struggle with it. That has been the dilemma, that has been the tension and that has been the pain, not being able to support children in that early stage.

Q161 **Lady Hermon:** Perhaps you could supply us with the figures. That would be very helpful. Do the Governing Bodies Association have figures of staff?

Nuala O'Neill: We have surveyed schools in the last year. We know there were at least 50 teaching and non-teaching redundancies within our member schools. That was just at the end of last year.

Q162 **Lady Hermon:** Is that for one year? In one calendar year, you have lost 50.

Nuala O'Neill: Yes. We do not have a breakdown between teaching and non-teaching but we can get that to you.

Q163 **Lady Hermon:** Again, how many schools do you have?

Nuala O'Neill: We have 50 schools.

Q164 **Lady Hermon:** Staff are under such enormous financial pressures, and I am sure many of them have sleepless night worrying about how they are going to put the heat on, as we have heard. A previous witness made a decision not to turn the heat on in a school until November. What degree of support do staff have from the Education Authority? Is there a helpline where staff can phone the Education Authority? We only have the one in Northern Ireland. We have sadly got rid of our separate education boards—the five of them—that seemed to function very well. We have an Education Authority. What is the relationship like with the Education Authority? What support does the Education Authority give to staff who are under stress?

Sir Gerry Loughran: Our schools are self-governing, so we cannot look to the Education Authority.

Q165 **Lady Hermon:** Who do you look to?

Nuala O'Neill: There is a provision of a service called Carecall, which is a counselling service that is available for all staff, regardless of whatever education sector they are in.



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Q166 **Lady Hermon:** Who funds Carecall?

Nuala O'Neill: I think it is the Department of Education?

Q167 **Lady Hermon:** The support that teachers have must come from the Department of Education, not the Education Authority.

Nuala O'Neill: They would come from existing schools as well, in the first instance. As employers, we are the employers of the staff within our schools.

Q168 **Lady Hermon:** Within the Governing Bodies Association, do you have a helpline that staff who are under pressure can call to ask for help?

Nuala O'Neill: No, we do not.

Roisin Marshall: That is a very good highlighted area.

Q169 **Lady Hermon:** It is a real gap. It is a serious gap. The pressure on teachers is enormous.

Roisin Marshall: Particularly for grant-maintained integrated schools that are their own governing bodies and also for the VGSs. That is true. Controlled and maintained schools can phone the EA. Schools have to manage themselves. Whether there is actually any help out there to make everyday decisions, probably not.

Q170 **Lady Hermon:** That is a huge gap. Can I just suggest that to you? How about vision of leadership within your schools? Who is giving vision and leadership in the integrated sector? Who is giving vision and leadership, in the absence of an Assembly, to the schools covered by the Governing Bodies Association? Where is the vision and the leadership? Who could you look to?

Roisin Marshall: Integrated schools have provided vision and leadership over the last 36 years within the education system. We have had schools that have not been planned by anyone other than parents. I have brought along a couple of copies of *There Were No Desks*. It is the story of integrated education over the last 35 years. I could only carry two in my small suitcase, because they are so heavy. This is a story that is remarkable, if not magical, in Northern Ireland.

Q171 **Lady Hermon:** Magical?

Roisin Marshall: I refer to it as magical because it came about because parents decided they wanted something different for their children. They wanted their children to be educated together. It is a really important story and it is a very young story. It is only 36 years old. We have to, and would love to, work with the planning authorities, the Education Authority and CCMS, along with our other support colleagues, to create the vision for Northern Ireland and schools in Northern Ireland that is about the very best possible start for our young people that we can give them. It may be back to a blank sheet but we have lots of examples of really good schools that are able to attract people from the minority



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community into them. We need to highlight that story and make sure that the vision and leadership of education in the future comes from where that passion came from.

This is about keeping the child at the centre. If we do not have the child at the centre, which I know, Lady Hermon, you are trying to get to, if this is impacting on our children, our young people within schools, we cannot sit back and allow that to happen. We have to do something. It is about transformation of the schools estate. It is about transformation but we would suggest that transformation of schools to integrated status can contribute a little bit to that story, which will be about providing, not in the future but right now, for our children in the classes, because we are failing our children right now, in terms of the impacts, as has been highlighted here this morning. We are doing them a disservice by how we are going about things. We do need, as Mr Mullholland said this morning, more money into the system. We cannot do this. Change does not happen without an input of financial incentive.

Q172 Lady Hermon: Thank you very much. That is a very comprehensive description of the benefits of integrated education. Is there a growing demand for integrated education? Do you see it in the numbers? Does the demand for places in integrated schools exceed the availability of places?

Roisin Marshall: I sometimes describe the growth of integrated education as exponential over 36 years. It has roughly been two schools a year. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the number of integrated places in integrated schools has doubled. Not a lot of people know that.

Q173 Lady Hermon: Is that right across Northern Ireland, or is it more east of the Bann?

Roisin Marshall: It is right across Northern Ireland.

Q174 Lady Hermon: That is really interesting. We will turn to the Governing Bodies Association now. What are your main priorities? What are your staff saying to you in terms of the priorities? Funding, I assume, is top, but there have to be other priorities that they bring to you.

Nuala O'Neill: It is funding but everything links in with that. I have been around visiting all of our member schools. There are a number of issues: budget to provide day-to-day services is a key one; capital is another huge demand within our schools. We are simply not seeing enough money being resourced into the facilities that we are going to see. A number of schools have undergone significant change, say, through area planning. Those changes have not been resourced yet in terms of capital infrastructure to support it.

Q175 Lady Hermon: Could you give us some examples?



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Nuala O'Neill: Yes. We have a number of schools that have had closure and expansion. Two schools have closed and become a voluntary grammar school and are operating across a split site. There is duplication of services there, because you might operate as a junior and senior school, so you have to have double lab technicians, double librarians and a number of services. You also have to factor in costs of staff travelling in between those two centres, and also timetabling and supply teacher costs that would be added to that. Those are changes we are finding. Area planning is supposed to be about delivery of the curriculum in a sustainable way. We are finding that a number of schools that have gone through that transformation are those that are most challenged sustainably.

Q176 **Lady Hermon:** Sir Gerry, do you want to add something to that?

Sir Gerry Loughran: One of the problems is many of our schools are quite old. The quality of the buildings does need a lot of attention, and of course the lack of resources contributes to the difficulties. One thing that I would want to draw to your attention is that, although obviously there are huge budgetary issues, there are also resources available that unfortunately are not being fully utilised.

Q177 **Lady Hermon:** What are those?

Sir Gerry Loughran: You asked earlier in the session about shared education. There is quite a lot of money earmarked for shared education. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to take it all up, partly due to the fact that we do not have Ministers. For example, there is one particular scheme, the Shared Education Campuses Programme, which is designed to encourage schools on a cross-sectoral and cross-community basis to come together and provide common facilities. My own school, for example, is involved in one such scheme, and there is something like £5 million earmarked against this particular scheme, but there is no Minister to make a decision.

Nuala O'Neill: Can I give a bit more context? I can think of at least one mid-size grammar school where they have 52 teaching and 54 non-teaching staff. In that school, 95% of the costs are on staffing, which gives that school 5%. If you factor in heating costs and things like that, there is actually very little in the budget that that school has control over.

Q178 **Jim Shannon:** Thank you for coming. It is obvious to me, if no one else in this House, that we have a very good integrated education system, within the Catholic controlled, within the state and also within integrated schools as well I have two grandchildren. Both of them attend the integrated primary school in Kircubbin. Mrs Breen is the principal down there. That is a choice made by their parents and greatly more so by the community in the numbers that go there. It does not take away from the other educational standards that other schools deliver, because they deliver equally as well, but there is a choice made by parents in relation to that.



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I want to ask you two very quick questions. I am very conscious that Mr Chairman has asked us to try to be concise, which will be a challenge for me if for nobody else on this Committee. There is a shortage of teachers across the whole of Northern Ireland. There are some 1,400 teacher and classroom assistant vacancies that have not been filled. There are a number of reasons put forward for that. Probably the number one issue is the issue of money that is available that schools can employ and the Education Authority can also employ. Some people have indicated to me that the reason why teachers are not applying for jobs and taking up the vacancies is also because of the pay gap. Again, I would like to get your thoughts upon that. Is that a very much salient factor in where we are?

I also want to ask a question about special needs education. I will ask collectively. Special needs education continues also to be a massive issue across the schools in my constituency, and I suspect in others as well. Therefore, I just want to get your thoughts upon where we are in relation to that. We also have a growth, again in my constituency, of primary schools and their numbers, which will ultimately reflect upon secondary schools, grammar schools and secondary education, in terms of whatever level that will be at.

I have some frustration with the Education Authority when it comes to working out a plan for the future. The gentleman who spoke before you, Mr Mulholland I think it was, referred to one school taking some 14 years to get their school built. The Education Authority looks at strategies, looks at plans, does all the stats and does all the figures, and by the time it gets to the stage where it has completed that, things have changed. Again, what are your thoughts upon how reflective the Education Authority is when it comes to teaching decisions at the very highest level?

Roisin Marshall: It is important for me to say that, as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, we have a budget of £613,000 per year. We have six officers. We are not a managing authority. There are grant-maintained integrated schools in each individual managing authority. There are 38 of those schools. The other 27 are controlled integrated schools. I would not feel best placed to answer a question about pay gaps, teacher salaries and stuff, because that is not our remit.

Q179 **Jim Shannon:** I will ask you the other question. If teachers are not getting the pay they should be getting or the potential pay they should be getting, is that off-putting for applicants to become a teacher? In Northern Ireland we train more teachers than other parts of the United Kingdom, but we have 1,400 job vacancies. It makes me wonder and pose this question. I know when my sister qualified for teaching, she went across the water, as did three others from the same class, by the way, but that was back a long, long time ago. I am just wondering what we can do to improve that. I would suggest that we need to look at the pay for teachers. It has to improve some time. We cannot keep on putting it off, like everything else that we put off in education. I am sure you would concur with that.



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Roisin Marshall: It is an issue for the managing authorities, yes, for sure.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I have to say that voluntary grammar schools have not really experienced too much difficulty in filling posts. Generally speaking, there are multiple applications for jobs when they do come up. There are certain disciplines where it can be difficult. There can be difficulties in maths, for example. That is a problem right across the UK, but overall we are probably not finding difficulties in recruiting staff.

Q180 **Jim Shannon:** The other part of that question—it was probably multiple questions—was about the issue of special needs education. Again, this comes up regularly in my constituency offices as a major issue. I am not quite sure why, but hopefully you might be able to answer this. It is really important that education and health work together better than they do now. Maybe that is because the plan that was put forward in 2015 by the Northern Ireland Assembly was never fully implemented and therefore the close co-ordination that was needed between education and health did not take place. Hopefully you might be able to answer this question: how do you see that progressing so that we can better meet the needs of special-education children?

Roisin Marshall: You are absolutely right: children who are the most vulnerable are unfortunately the ones who are probably suffering most in all of this, and of course their families are suffering as well. You are right. We need a vision for health and education working in partnership. There is no doubt in my mind about that. I taught in a special school for a number of years, and we had on-site occupational therapy and nurses on site and so on.

Our vision certainly would be for a school where all children, of all abilities, all disabilities, all religions and cultures and so on, enter the one gate, and there are different pathways for those children that are appropriate for them. This vision of our education system needs to be given time to be thought through, because not all children learn at the same pace and not all children have the same talents and abilities, but all children deserve the very, very best start in life. How can we create that vision and then make it happen, especially for our most vulnerable children? They deserve as much as anybody else to have the very best start in life. In terms of the administrators and the education, we would certainly be very supportive of making sure we are trying to transform the school system so that health and education are meeting their needs and children are not trying to fit into two different systems. It is a really good point you are making.

Q181 **Jim Shannon:** It is very important in today's society that we live in. Almost by the very nature of us as elected representatives, people come to us and they do not tell us how good things are; they come and tell us what is wrong. That is the nature of life. The job of an elected representative is to respond to that. You perhaps get a particular focus on where the issues are. I am very conscious that teaching today is not



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just about education and teaching the child; it is about character-building and personality-building. It is about the issues they have at home. The teacher has to be a lot more than just a teacher of education. That is the point I am trying to make. How do you feel that is happening within the education system? I am very conscious that we have a fairly prevalent and high level of mental health issues amongst our children, which would indicate to me that we need to have a focus upon that at a time of stringent financial problems. What are your thoughts on that? What do we need to do to make that better?

Roisin Marshall: The idea that teachers will be the panacea for all things that are happening out there in society and that we will be able to cure everything through schools and education is simply not realistic. However, teachers are very resourceful; schools are very resourceful. There is an issue with our children and young people in schools—I hear it more and more every day—around their levels of anxiety. That has a lot to do with external factors and so on.

I know the integrated schools are particularly interested—I am sure all schools are, but I know this because of the fora we create for schools—in doing something about the issues in mental health within their schools and sharing good practice. Collaboration between schools is the only way that is going to ensure you actually get some help from outside. There is this point about whether there is someone to ring in the EA. More and more schools are having to rely on each other. That collaborative nature is very important.

It comes back to this. If we really, truly want to help the child at the centre, all of the policies and all of the things that create our education system should be enabled to do that. That should be our focus. It is not about organisations. It is not about ideologies, philosophies or indeed religions, cultures or whatever. This is about giving our children the very best start in life. You are absolutely right: we need to do that from a visionary perspective. We need to do it now. We cannot wait. Our children only get one chance at education.

Nuala O'Neill: From a voluntary grammar perspective, 10% of the children across our education estate present with additional support needs. We would be looking at that. Our key concerns, as this number increases, would be that SENCOs—special educational needs co-ordinators—in schools are adequately resourced and supported. We also need to make sure there is some kind of continuity of funding there to support those roles, to make sure there is no loss of specialist support within the school for special educational needs pupils.

With regards to mental health, that is a key issue within our schools. We are seeing a number of examples across Northern Ireland of schools collaborating together to develop mental health resilience programmes for pupils. They are doing the best they can within the limited resources they have.



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Diane McDowell: Mr Shannon, I am not sure where the figure of 1,400 vacancies came from, but it triggered a thought in my head.

Jim Shannon: It came from the National Association of Head Teachers on Monday. They gave me the figures.

Diane McDowell: I do not doubt it at all, but it triggered a thought in my head. As a practical point, as a school bursar, schools are not being given information to enable them to plan for the long term at the minute. That may contribute to that, in that we are getting our budgets in March for the year starting in April. We are not getting three-year budgets. We are not able to make commitments of permanent contracts ad infinitum when we do not know what we are getting the next month. I do not know whether that contributes in any way to the scale of the vacancies. It could be that schools cannot commit.

The other point in connection with that—again, it is a purely practical point but it is important—is when you get your budget in March to start in April, because 90% of your budget is going on people, on human capital, you cannot respond in April. Certainly in the post-primary world, April is the month before exam season starts. You cannot be taking teachers out of the equation at that point in time. Your ability to respond is probably the end of the summer and the start of the next academic year in September. You are in a situation like we faced this year where budgets were cut. You were getting that information in March or April. You were not able to take a lot of action until the following September, and the action you had to take was perhaps more than you would have had to take if you could have taken it in April. You might have had to take 20 hours a week out of something from September to March, where you could have taken 10 hours a week out from April to March if you had had the information. My point is that having more information to enable us to long-term plan our resources would be extremely helpful.

Q182 **John Grogan:** Thank you for coming in and talking to us. I was going to go back to the question about whether there are too many schools in Northern Ireland. We had very powerful evidence from Deirdre Gillespie of St Mary's Grammar School. I will not read it all, but she said, "We have five competing sectors, duplication across the sectors, lack of co-operation and lack of co-ordination" and "We have financially and educationally unviable schools in Northern Ireland". She calls area-based planning "the elephant in the room". Do we not just have to accept that there are far too many schools?

Nuala O'Neill: I would agree that there are too many schools across the education estate. Whether or not rationalisation of that estate is the great panacea to the education budget, I do not know. What I do know is that there are certainly a number of unsustainable schools within the education estate. In order to transform this and to bring a 21st century education system into place, we need to resource that change. It was alluded to earlier. Schools have undergone significant change, whether that is amalgamation, becoming all-ability or issues like that. That



impacts on the workforce if they are operating across sites. Those all have associated costs, so we need to make sure they are resourced so that any schools that do change through the transformation process are fully sustainable.

But I would agree. The former Minister of Education Peter Weir had mentioned that we need to address schools with composite classes where two or more year groups are being taught together. We also need to look at outcomes from schools where they have small sixth forms. We would agree with that. For area planning, those areas have to be a priority so you are delivering the best outcomes for children and young people.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I would just add that our schools tend to be quite large, so we do not have the sustainability problem in our sector, but we recognise that there is a wider sustainability problem. I would make the point—I am going to put on my Education Authority hat in making this point—that we are a largely rural community. Whenever we talk about the numbers of schools and the sustainability of schools, we need to take that into account. The right comparison is with, for example, Scotland north of the central belt, rather than the heavily populated areas in England.

Roisin Marshall: For us, area planning is an opportunity. Where there are a number of schools of different management type within an area, it is an opportunity for there to be a conversation that would include parents and the community to say, “Okay, we maybe do not need all of these different types of schools. What is it that we need?” Whatever that is, the consultation with the community is vital. For us, as a growing sector, because we are only 36 years old, as I explained before—and growing every year—when it comes to sustainability, integrated schools have always started small and grown. There is a wee bit of a paradox. We are fully engaged in the area planning process, but we also do not want them to be a barrier to the growth of integrated education, if that makes sense. When it comes to sustainability—they talk about the 105 number for schools starting off—we have always started a primary school with 12 or 15, and then it grows because parents gain confidence in the school and send their children there.

The area planning process is better than it was. We are getting better at collaborating and working together. If you are a big, sustainable school, you probably do not need to worry. The problem is that you have a small controlled school within a predominantly Catholic area, or vice versa—a small Catholic school within a predominantly Protestant area. We caution against just closing that school. What that means is, whatever the minority community, they have no reason to come into that town or village anymore. We have to be really, really careful. One of the things behind the notion of shared education was asking, “How can we work better together to make sure that there is appropriate choice but also



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efficiency in the system?" There is a tension there. We are working hard at it, but we are not yet doing as well as we could, but we will get better.

- Q183 **John Grogan:** Thank you for those answers. I recognise the rurality point, even from a Yorkshire perspective. I just have one other question. We have heard quite a lot today about the needs of those who are less well off in society and their children and so on and how part of a successful education system is every child having the opportunity to succeed. Looking at the socioeconomic figures—I do not know them for the integrated sector, so I would be interested to hear them—for the grammar school sector, you do better than in England. The Sutton Trust say that only 3% of people going to English grammars are children on free school meals; I think it is about 14% in Northern Ireland.

What is happening? Is it going up? I think around 30% of people across Northern Ireland are on free school meals. Should you be doing a bit better? Do you need to look at your tests at 11? Can you ever get a fair test at 11? I probably do not want to open up that debate too much, but are you doing right by those people who are on free school meals? On the integrated sector, is it a middle-class sector? Are you educating people who are on free school meals as well to the proportion of 30%?

Nuala O'Neill: First of all, the free school meal average is about 25% across Northern Ireland. We have a large number of voluntary grammar schools that exceed that.

- Q184 **John Grogan:** But quite a few will be lower.

Nuala O'Neill: Yes. We also have to say that we represent schools that select and schools that do not select. Voluntary grammar school is actually a style of management. We are finding that the free school meal entitlement within our schools is increasing. At the end of the day, our schools are oversubscribed and some method of selection is required. That is what a number of our schools choose to do. There are different approaches across the different schools as to how that is handled. It is up to each individual school, mindful of the community that they are in, to decide what would work best for that school there.

- Q185 **John Grogan:** In the ones that select, is it going up or going down?

Nuala O'Neill: From what we have read, there are more pupils choosing to do the AQE and GL examinations.

- Q186 **John Grogan:** Are the numbers of people on free school meals going up in grammar schools?

Nuala O'Neill: Yes, it is.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Can I just give the example of my own school? Five years ago, we were at 18%; now we are at 24%.

- Q187 **John Grogan:** How is it in the integrated sector?



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Roisin Marshall: At primary level, integrated schools are on average at the same level as the controlled and maintained sectors in terms of free school meals. Certainly in post-primary integrated schools, there is a larger percentage of children on free school meals. That brings us to two different particular issues. When grant-maintained integrated schools started, over the years, they were built for 500 pupils. When Bain came in 2006, there was talk that 600 pupils were necessary to be a sustainable school. Those schools have had to grow over the last few years in order just to be at a sustainable enrolment level.

With that said, as Nuala pointed out, there are a number of schools within the integrated sector that have either very small sixth forms or no sixth forms. Given the number of children with free school meals, there is an inequity there. Something needs to be done in order to ensure that those children, whose parents have chosen integrated provision, are given the opportunity to have the appropriate pathway for them from three through to 19. That is a challenge for us. Integrated schools are alive to that at the moment and they are trying to think about what they need to do. I know the area planning process will try to help us with this and not put a further barrier up against integrated provision growing.

Q188 **Mr Goodwill:** I would like to ask you a question about excluded children and pupil referral units. It is a worrying trend, certainly in England, where some schools are managing behaviour, and therefore managing their results and Ofsted inspections, by increasing levels of exclusion. That sometimes leads to forced home schooling, which has its own problems. Children are often put into pupil referral units, which can be very inadequate. How does the integrated sector operate in that respect? Do you run PRUs? Do individual schools have their own PRUs in Northern Ireland? Is the provision adequate for those children who find themselves excluded?

Roisin Marshall: Again, the 38 GMIs are responsible for their own management, so the buck stops with their board of governors. The other 27 schools are under the Education Authority. I do not have the authority to answer that question, apart from to say that, as an organisation, as the Council for Integrated Education, we would not encourage any child to be excluded. If that has to happen, they need to be found an appropriate placement. Again, it is not something that is part of our remit.

Q189 **Mr Goodwill:** Are there not high levels of exclusion in parts of Northern Ireland? Blackpool, for example, has 500 children in their PRU, which is a mind-blowing number.

Roisin Marshall: From my own experience of education over the last 30 years, I would say there is a lot of pressure on schools to achieve at GCSE and A-level. Regardless of whether the results are officially printed, they are printed. That is a disservice to our young people and to the schools that are trying to do their best. Invariably, unfair methods of trying to manage that situation may arise. As educationalists in Northern



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Ireland, we have a duty to make sure that schools are given support for that and not enabled.

Q190 **Mr Goodwill:** Do you have any comments to make?

Sir Gerry Loughran: I do not think the incidence of exclusion is as great as some of—

Q191 **Mr Goodwill:** It varies dramatically between local authorities.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Absolutely, yes. The number of exclusions in voluntary grammar schools is relatively small because of the way schools co-operate and work together. That is one of the themes that is really important to emphasise. There is a lot of working together among the schools in particular areas. Quite often, an excluded child can be managed without having to be expelled if another school agrees to take it. This is a situation of, "You scratch my back and I will scratch yours, because I might be the next one to be looking for the opportunity". The number of actual exclusions is relatively modest. We were looking at some numbers the other day in the Education Authority that is responsible for all the controlled schools, which is by far the greatest number in terms of sectors. Last year, it was less than 50 in total. That puts it into perspective.

Q192 **Mr Goodwill:** It is a credit to the teachers and the schools in Northern Ireland that they are keeping those numbers as low as that.

Sir Gerry Loughran: What is really important is this idea of managing it and trying to encourage schools to work together to deal with pupils who are experiencing difficulties.

Q193 **Mr Goodwill:** What about trends in home schooling? Sometimes that can be presented to a parent as an option they did not really want, as an alternative to exclusion. Are we seeing increasing trends of home schooling or is that still bubbling away at low levels?

Sir Gerry Loughran: No, not necessarily. If a pupil is proving to be difficult within the school, which can be very disruptive, one thing the school can do is arrange for tuition to be offered in the school on a basis different to the other people in the same class. That is only a temporary solution. You really need the co-operation of parents to try to make sure that you work through a difficulty of that kind.

Q194 **Mr Goodwill:** It sounds like, in that regard at least, Northern Ireland can be listed alongside the best authorities in England in its performance.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes, that is probably true.

Q195 **Lady Hermon:** Gerry, could I just direct my first question to you? There will be a supplementary to everyone. At one stage, you said you were putting on your Education Authority hat. I want to ask you a question on that point. You sit as a nominated representative of the voluntary grammar schools on the Education Authority board. Is that correct?



Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes.

Q196 **Lady Hermon:** It is my feeling—and it has been reflected to me by the principals of schools—that the Education Authority is very remote compared to the previous Education and Library Boards. I feel it is remote in my own personal experience. I also want to put on the record that I make no criticism at all of the staff that work so hard within the Education Authority. However, could I ask you, Sir Gerry, as the nominated representative sitting on the Education Authority board, what do you see as the shortcomings? There are shortcomings in the Education Authority. They are understaffed; they are under pressure. What do you see that needs reforming within the Education Authority? As I say, I make no criticism of those who work within it at the present time. Put your EA hat back on and just tell us what needs to be done to make it better. We need to make it better.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I will answer from a personal perspective, Lady Hermon, because I am obviously not speaking here on behalf of the Education Authority. The biggest challenge is that we are so new. The Education Authority came into being less than four years ago. It involved absorbing five existing Education and Library Boards.

Lady Hermon: It also involved losing a lot of staff, yes.

Sir Gerry Loughran: The Education and Library Boards operated on a regional basis. One of the bosses was somebody you were talking to earlier today, Barry Mulholland. Barry knew every blade of grass in his particular territory. When you make a change of that kind, you lose something of the immediacy of impact.

Lady Hermon: Definitely, yes.

Sir Gerry Loughran: It is up to us to work our way through this process in such a way that we start to build even stronger relationships with schools. There is no point in pretending: resources are a problem. We have been obliged to make massive savings in staff. If you take a staff member out, it means you are potentially losing another point of contact. That has been an issue. Trying to transform and save money and reorganise everybody into a new organisation is quite a challenge. I think the Education Authority has done quite well within the limitations imposed by financial restraints. Other people are entitled to make their own judgments. It is really important that we in the Education Authority get the sort of feedback that you are offering.

Q197 **Lady Hermon:** Is that a further conversation for another day? You could meet with principals from North Down, who have serious concerns about the operation of the Education Authority and the support and help they need from it. We need to improve education in Northern Ireland for the next generation. It is what we are handing on to the next generation of children, so we need to improve the operation and effectiveness of the Education Authority. There is no doubt about that.



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Sir Gerry Loughran: I recognise the North Down issue that you refer to. The Department is now involved in this as well. It is not just the Education Authority. Quite clearly, the Department is heavily involved. There is planning now to deal with the North Down situation. Perhaps everyone missed the need to plan a little bit earlier in terms of what happened last year.

Q198 **Lady Hermon:** These are the unplaced children.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes.

Q199 **Lady Hermon:** We absolutely cannot have a reputation for that. This brings me neatly on to something that Roisin said. Roisin, you said that there needs to be greater collaboration between schools and suggested that there was increasing collaboration between schools. We are not a large jurisdiction in Northern Ireland. We are about 1.8 million people. We have a Department of Education; we have an Education Authority. We have taken evidence today from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; we have taken evidence from the Controlled Schools' Support Council; we have taken evidence from the Governing Bodies Association, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and also the representative from the Department for Education Local Management of Schools Funding Committee and bursar at Hazelwood Integrated Primary School.

How much collaboration is there between all of those organisations? Do you meet with one another often? Thank goodness that your heads are nodding in the right direction, because we could create the impression here that you are all in fact working very hard and very diligently. I have enormous regard for all teachers, all teaching staff, all auxiliaries, all support staff in schools and all of those who manage what is a hugely valuable resource. There is no getting away from that. I would like to think that you collaborate. I would like to think that you meet not just here giving evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee—again, thank you for doing that—but that you meet regularly to try to co-ordinate, in the absence of an Assembly. We do not have an Education Minister, but between you there can be a vision and a plan together by the time we have a Minister appointed again, hopefully next year.

Nuala O'Neill: There is collaboration at all levels. If you look at school level, the schools are supporting each other through the Area Learning Communities. Where it works well, there is extremely good collaboration between the schools. As sectoral bodies or managing authorities, we meet regularly. That would be under the auspices of a particular theme. It could be to do with area planning, finances or anything like that. Certainly, in fairness to the EA, they would also encourage us to attend their principal engagement sessions and the engagement sessions they are doing with the schools as well. Certainly since I started working for the GBA, it is fair to say that the collaboration there has improved greatly, not only on a school level, where it has been working well, but certainly within the sectors as well.



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Roisin Marshall: In fairness to the EA, if area planning is to be successful, genuinely we have to come up with creative and innovative solutions, which we have not really done to date. To be fair, a lot of what we have done to date is about picking off those schools with two or three teachers and so on. I am not sure whether that is the best strategy, but that is where we are at the minute. If area planning is to work really well, the EA potentially will need more resources in order to go out and have those community conversations with communities. This is about education in particular areas.

As you know yourself, no two areas are the same, so we cannot have a one-size-fits-all solution and we cannot have sectors coming with lists of schools that they are going to close or lists for amalgamation or whatever within sectors. What we need is proper data analysis. We need the data. We are data-deficient. We are making decisions on the back of notions and anecdotal stories as opposed to an absolute understanding in terms of, "This is the situation". I do believe that the data is there, but it is taking a little bit of time to come together. We then can sit down and make decisions about areas.

As I say, this cannot be about, as you say, all of those groups and all of their vested interests. If that is where we are in 10 years' time, I will be really disappointed. This is about having conversations about education in areas. I would even go so far as to suggest that how we fund schools needs to be different. Rather than the money following the schools, which creates competition between schools, can we fund areas? That is just a suggestion, but these are the kinds of conversations, as Nuala said, that we need to have at those area planning meetings. Otherwise we are just going to get what we have always got.

Q200 **Lady Hermon:** Can we hear from Nuala, since you were mentioned there, or Sir Gerry, whichever one of you wants to speak?

Nuala O'Neill: I am sorry. Could you repeat the question?

Lady Hermon: It was about whether there is in fact collaboration and whether you are hopeful that we will not be in the same position in 10 years' time.

Nuala O'Neill: As I mentioned, we are collaborating well and we are working together on different work streams at a local level and within the wider sectors together.

Q201 **Lady Hermon:** My question was more about collaboration between the Education Authority, the Department of Education and schools at every level. Is that a conversation that goes on routinely at home in Northern Ireland? Do those individual bodies meet to discuss the education of our children at all levels?

Nuala O'Neill: There is a conversation going on within the Department of Education at the moment, along with the EA and CCMS, where they are discussing the transformation agenda within the entire education



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system. That is something that we have not been party to yet. We have been invited to a meeting at the end of the month where we will look at that. We think—or I certainly believe anyway—that for a system to be truly transformative it has to involve all of the sectors and engage with all of them. This will look at things like 14-to-19 provision and other areas. We would like to have been involved earlier in this conversation, but we will know where we are later in the month.

Q202 **Lady Hermon:** Why do you think you were not involved earlier?

Nuala O'Neill: I am not aware of why. We have asked to be involved, and that is why a meeting has been convened on 18 December.

Q203 **Chair:** There is a very quick question from me. Grammar schools have run surpluses more than other schools, if you look at the figures. Do you have any idea why that might be?

Nuala O'Neill: You were looking at the Audit Office figures. We have found that this is probably not the case, because they were dealing with figures up to 2016-17. What we found is that that was when the employer contributions increased, at that stage. In the survey we did of the member schools, we are finding that an increasing number of schools are now projecting deficits, and the level of those deficits is increasing in size as well. What we do have is the ability to manage the budget that is given to us. We want to do that in a way that is not of detriment to the provision of education to children and young people. That is becoming increasingly difficult to do. We will be looking at issues such as the availability of subjects and things like that. Things have been tight. There were surpluses that were accrued, but we are not finding that experience across board.

Q204 **Chair:** You think it is an artefact in the figures. You do not think it is a reflection of the genuine position of grammars with respect to other schools.

Nuala O'Neill: No, absolutely not. Certainly, from my engagement with schools, the increase in employer contributions has made things increasingly more difficult for our member schools.

Q205 **Chair:** Are you finding that you are reliant in any way upon contributions and the generosity of parents?

Nuala O'Neill: Yes, we are. Our schools do seek fees. They operate to a capital fee, if they receive 85% capital funding from the Department. That 15% is topped up through a parental contribution. That has been capped in the last 10 years at £140. Similarly, a school might ask for a parental contribution, which is generally quite low. That itself is voluntary. It is entirely at the discretion of a parent as to whether that is paid or not paid.

Q206 **Chair:** Most parents pay it.



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Nuala O'Neill: I would not say that. It would differ for each individual school. As well as that, I am conscious that we were talking about free school meals earlier. Our schools would have policies in place for people on low incomes as well.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for being with us today. You have been very generous in giving your time to help us compile our report on this important subject. You look as if you want to say something.

Roisin Marshall: I just wanted to say one tiny wee thing. Listening earlier, I just want to make it absolutely clear that integrated schools do not get any more money than any other school; they get exactly the same funding. I also wanted to say that integrated education is the biggest, most sustainable and most cost-effective community-relations project that we have in Northern Ireland. That is a fact.

Chair: Thank you. That is now on the record. Thank you for making that observation. Thank you ever so much for being with us today.