

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 27 February 2019

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

Questions 250 – 334

Witnesses

I: Sir Robert Salisbury, Chair of the 2013 Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme; Koulla Yiasouma, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Robert Salisbury and Koulla Yiasouma.

Q250 **Chair:** Good morning. Welcome on this beautiful spring morning. Thank you so much for coming today to assist us in our deliberation on this subject. I should just explain that, generally speaking, this Committee would not be involved with things like health and education directly in Northern Ireland, although some members of the Committee clearly are as constituency MPs. Since we have no representative institutions at a Northern Ireland level currently, we feel it is important that we try to be as helpful as we can, in terms of important public policy areas. Education is one of those. That is a bit of background to why we are conducting this particular piece of work. We shortly intend to publish a report with recommendations and hopefully that will be useful in terms of shaping public policy in Northern Ireland—this is an important area—and it will impact upon those who make decisions. At the moment that is the civil service of Northern Ireland. It is, to an extent, the Secretary of State, and we hope that in the very near future it will be restored Ministers at Stormont.

May I just ask you to introduce yourselves, say where you are coming from and give a little bit about your background? We will then crack on with some questions.

Koulla Yiasouma: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Koulla Yiasouma. I am the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and as such am tasked to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of all children living in Northern Ireland. We do that in a variety of ways, including reviewing and advising Government on various policies and legislations. I am required by law to take into account the views of children and young people themselves and the role that parents play in children's lives, as well as having due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As commissioner, I have set priorities, and it will not be a surprise to you to know that education inequality and inclusion is one of them, alongside poverty and mental health. For that reason, I warmly welcome the Committee's focus on education today.

We can all agree that our education system should be one where education received by all children is of a high quality and that develops every child's talents, personality and abilities to the full, in line with Article 29 of the UNCRC. It is not right that increasingly, however, it is our most vulnerable children and young people who are furthest away from this standard.

We are all extremely concerned about the financial position of the education system in Northern Ireland, which is now operating under a



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real-terms reduction of over £230 million over the last eight years. School budgets have remained flat in cash terms over a number of years, and we await the inevitability that increasing numbers of schools will move into deficit, given their limited scope to find ways of making further cuts in running costs. It is useful to remember here that 90% of a school's budget goes on staffing, so there is little scope for further cuts.

Almost £37 million of the confidence-and-supply funding will be used by the Department of Education in this financial year to address financial pressures, reduce cuts and maintain levels of funding across a number of key education policies aimed at addressing educational inequalities. We all welcome the fact that these crucial policies are being sustained, but it is extremely concerning that their funding is short term and non-recurrent, which could result in these policies being withdrawn with very little notice. Cuts to any of these services will have a detrimental impact on our most disadvantaged children.

I would respectfully suggest that the priority for this inquiry must be to make recommendations that will ensure that children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, receive an education that meets all of their needs and allows them to develop to their maximum potential. This is the core purpose of education and in order to achieve it, it must be right that we invest additional resources in the short term, with a view to longer-term redesign of our education system, where all children, regardless of gender, religion or ability, attend their closest school, which, like all schools, delivers an excellent-quality education. I am really looking forward to the discussion that we are going to have now.

Sir Robert Salisbury: Good morning, everyone. My background is slightly different. A long time ago I was a teacher in a school, and then I took over as head teacher of the seventh-worst school in the country, to see if it could be run very differently. That proved to be a very successful venture. I then went on to be a professor at the University of Nottingham's School of Education. I then ran the training for all future heads across England, and that was very enlightening.

Since my wife was appointed to run a college in Omagh in County Tyrone, we decided to come and live in Tyrone for a short while. It was initially deemed to be a three or four-year effort, and we are still there. I did the funding review in 2013, so it is in fact six years out of date. I have had very little to do with funding in Northern Ireland since then. Looking at funding in the school system is almost an exercise to put your lights out altogether, but I did make some very general observations and they might be helpful to the Committee today. It may be that some of the recommendations in the report have now been overtaken and that my views are no longer valid on that.

Q251 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. We have studied your 2013 report. Can I ask, by way of a first question, about recommendations 5 to 8, which dealt with central funding? You were clear that central funding was



part of the problem. We have taken evidence, not least during our visit to Strabane recently, that a lack of devolution of funding to schools is causing huge inefficiency, it is causing management issues and it seems to me, on the face of it, that those recommendations that you made six years ago have not been rolled out and that is causing some discomfort to educators in Northern Ireland. I wonder whether you have any observations on that.

Sir Robert Salisbury: We felt that there was a lack of transparency about those funds that were held centrally, but there were certainly two opinions about whether you should delegate more funds to schools. The grant-maintained, voluntary-aided and integrated schools run their own budgets and they were very firmly in favour of having as much money delegated to them, so that they could operate as a true business, in a sense. They were very firmly of that opinion. On the other hand, many of the smaller primaries did not wish to have any more central money delegated to them, in that they felt that would come with extra responsibilities and obligations.

There are clearly some areas of central funding that it would be very unusual to delegate, like transport costs, school meals and so on. In terms of teacher training, the courses to run and all of those freedoms that would come with greater delegation, when we looked at it the majority of post-primary principals wanted as much funding delegated to them as possible. Whether that is still the same now, as budgets tighten, I am not sure. Peter Weir ran some sort of survey and he found that it had moved back to people preferring some of those central services to be still held.

Q252 **Chair:** The Integrated Education Fund, a charity in Northern Ireland, has given written evidence to this Committee as part of this inquiry. It takes a slightly different view to yours, Koulla, if I may say so.

Koulla Yiasouma: That will be a first.

Chair: It points out that Northern Ireland has funding that is ranked fourth among the 12 UK regions, so it is relatively well funded. It point out that the UK overall is among the top in the OECD league table for money spent on education. The proposition is that it is not primarily a funding issue, but rather how the money is spent. I suspect you will not agree with that, given your opening comments, but what you probably will agree with is the fact that there is a cost to segregated education. and that is pitched at around £1.5 billion, which is an extraordinary sum of money. That is according to the Deloitte study of April 2007. There are 60,000 surplus school places in Northern Ireland, which is an inefficiency that would be unconscionable in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I suppose my rhetorical question to you is whether you think that is a price worth paying for what amounts to parental choice in Northern Ireland, or do we need some fundamental structural change to education



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in Northern Ireland, possibly tied in with some adjustment to the funding settlement maybe, in order to make the kinds of changes that we want to see to ensure that education in Northern Ireland is even better than it is at the moment? It is worth bearing in mind that, according to the league tables, standards in Northern Ireland are pretty good.

Koulla Yiasouma: They are pretty good for some children, not for all. The purpose of an education system has to be that they are the best they can be for every single child; over 340,000 children who attend school.

You are quite right about the rhetorical question, and I agree with the IEF in that we absolutely need fundamental reform or redesign of our education system, but that is a long-term process. It is very difficult to get to what the cost is of our division. 84,000 pupils receive free school transport at a cost of £81 million a year in Northern Ireland. They get on a bus and that bus takes them past several schools to get to the school of their choice. I agree that parents have an absolute right to choose the best school for their children. The state, however, has a responsibility to provide for all the children.

What I said earlier was the nearest school should be the very best school and it should provide the same quality of education as any other school. That will require a conversation in Northern Ireland, inclusive of all the people in Northern Ireland, including the children and young people. It is a very emotive subject to put academic selection on the table and to put our segregated by religion education system on the table, as well as the fact that we separate so many children with special educational needs from our mainstream. That is a long-term piece of work that we absolutely have to do.

In the short term, however, in the next two to five years, we have a crisis. We have an unsustainable education system. Some of that unsustainability is because of our multi-sectors that we have, but we are not going to overcome that any time soon. In the short term, we need additional investment to get us over, but we have to have a long-term conversation. We are leaving too many of our children behind because of the system.

Q253 **Chair:** What form do you think that conversation should take?

Koulla Yiasouma: If you look at what has happened with healthcare in Northern Ireland, or actually anywhere—we were talking about this outside—10 years ago it would have been unconscionable to close the local hospital. All these reform processes—Transforming Your Care, Bengoa and Donaldson—have got people to the place, “If I have to go a little bit further to get a better level of healthcare, then maybe my local hospital should provide different sorts of services”. We are getting there. That is part of a conversation we need to have.

The other thing is we need to look at what the figures tell us. If we look at academic selection, which I brought up quite early in the conversation,



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it is supposed to be the great leveller. Choosing children in post primary based on their academic ability should lift children from poorer backgrounds into this selective academic school. The facts tell us differently. The facts tell us that only 14% of children on free school meals go to grammar schools, whereas 40% of children in non-selective schools are on free school meals. Three times as many children on free school meals go to non-selective school. It does not lift anybody. It only perpetuates the social divisions that we have. The conversation needs to be had, "What is an education system fit for every single child in Northern Ireland?"

Q254 **Chair:** You have identified two things. You have identified selection on academic merit at 11 and you have identified selection based upon where you are in the community. Of those two in the context of Northern Ireland, which do you think is the most important?

Koulla Yiasouma: I do not know why you cannot do both.

Chair: I am asking you to choose.

Koulla Yiasouma: What we see as our biggest inequality in our education system in Northern Ireland is between the haves and the have-nots. It is just not fair. It is not a fair education system. Ask any child who goes to a non-selective school who comes from a poorer community and they are like the child with their nose to the sweetie shop and they cannot afford to go in. The biggest injustice in our education system in Northern Ireland is academic selection.

There are a number of other things that we need to look at. I do not want to just focus on that. Children with special educational needs, for example, take up a lot of time of my office. If Northern Ireland is to have a shared future, we need to educate Protestant and Catholic children and our increasingly diverse community together. We need to educate our boys and girls together. For me, the greatest injustice has to be what we do to our children from socially disadvantaged areas. Have I answered your question?

Q255 **Chair:** That is perfectly fine. Would you identify any subset of the community in Northern Ireland who are particularly disadvantaged on the basis of their results at the moment?

Koulla Yiasouma: It is not about me identifying it. The facts speak for themselves. Our Roma and traveller children, if you look at the statistics, do least well, but it is well known that Protestant boys on free school meals are at the bottom of the table and that speaks to social disadvantage, it speaks to deindustrialisation and it speaks to the changing economy of Northern Ireland.

Q256 **Chair:** Sir Robert, do you have any thoughts?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I would like to go back to your original question and be a lot more blunt. We clearly have far too many types of schools.



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We have far too many tiny schools and we have been living beyond our means for a long time. When I interviewed principals—do not forget this is six years ago—they seemed to almost have a laissez-faire attitude to funding. It did not seem to matter whether they were going into deficit budgets; somebody would pick up the tab at the end of the day.

We felt that there was clearly enough money in the system. As you said, it is quite high in the leagues of OECD spending, but because of the nature of the schools in Northern Ireland and the historic structure, the money is spread too thinly. The funding crisis we have now was inevitable. We could see it coming perhaps 10 years ago, and I am not surprised that schools now are really struggling. The demands on schools increase year by year. Even this morning on the television, there is yet another demand on what schools are expected to do in terms of wellbeing and so on. The cost of running schools goes up year by year. Whereas you could have chalk and blackboards a few years ago, everybody needs laptops these days. The costs of running it are going up. The gap between what Governments have to spend and what schools need to run properly is getting wider and the funding crisis is inevitable. Schools have cut down as much as they can at the moment, but there is a point at which they cannot manage, and it strikes me that ever more schools are now going into deficit budgets.

The anomalies in the system were very evident to us. While ever you have small school allowance that is not linked to the needs of the school and the socioeconomic area the schools are in, then there is unfairness and anomalies. To give you an example, some primary schools we looked at in very affluent areas, because they were small schools and received very generous small school allowance, were receiving £14,200 per pupil, while other schools in tougher areas—socioeconomically deprived areas—were sometimes receiving not much over £3,000 per student. You have this enormous anomaly that was linked to the needs of the institution rather than the needs of the children in it. That still prevails and there is where the difficulty is. Some small primary schools with big small school allowances had surplus budgets, whereas others in more needy areas had severe deficit budgets.

What was staring us in the face six years ago was that we were living beyond our means in the school structure that we had, and it is a difficult thing to tackle. These are tough decisions. As many politicians said to me at the time, there are no votes in closing schools. We can see that there needs to be amalgamations. There needs to be cross-sectorial decisions made. In Fermanagh, where we looked at it, there are many small rural schools. The sustainable schools policy did not look at having a school in every area. It looked at dividing it into the two sectorial types of schools there. It struck me that we should be asking communities, "If you want to retain a school in the area, should it be a combined school?" Forget the term "integrated"; that has connotations as well. Use the words "combined school" rather than having no school, because the



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minute you close either one type of school or another, your transport costs go up and the transport costs in Northern Ireland are enormous.

My view is that it needs a root-and-branch change. To give you a more practical example, Omagh, where I live, has six post-primary schools with six principals, six building costs and six staffing costs. Retford in Nottinghamshire, with a similar population, has two. If you replicate that across the whole of Northern Ireland, you have your funding crisis in one view. It is a massive undertaking to have a root-and-branch review of it.

I asked all the religious leaders, "Would you be prepared to relinquish your automatic places on the governing bodies?" "No". I asked many politicians, "Would you be prepared to advocate the closure of one of your local schools?" "No". There you have it, in a way.

Q257 **Chair:** How do you go from where we are at the moment to where you want to be?

Sir Robert Salisbury: You need a really honest look at the provision of education. It struck me, in the end, that you are beginning to look at combined schools and all-ability schools.

Q258 **Chair:** You have said how incredibly unpopular all this is likely to be, particularly with politicians, and as a politician I understand that. What would be the vehicle that you would use to procure the fundamental changes that you have both outlined?

Sir Robert Salisbury: There are two things. First, we should look less at the convenience of having a school in a town and look at the educational values of a larger school. That has not been promoted nearly enough. You may be pushing more at an open door if you start to talk in terms of educational benefit to the youngsters rather than the defence of the traditional structures that we have.

To give you an example, years ago when I did the taskforce review on literacy in Northern Ireland, we found that in many of the tiny primary schools there were no maths specialists or science specialists. It may be that if you join together schools you can run proper teams and you can have a full range of the curriculum. Many of the smaller post-primary schools just cannot have the specialisms that they need. It is a very restricted curriculum. We should be probably pushing the notion that the entitlement that youngsters have in a school is increased if you have larger combined school.

Koulla Yiasouma: There is something about going back to what the purpose of education is, and what we know is the number-one issue facing children in Northern Ireland and across the UK is mental health and wellbeing. Lots of people, particularly around early intervention and prevention, talk about education's role in that. It cannot just be schools. It cannot just be families. It cannot just be the health services. It has to be a combination of all three.



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I go back to having local and area conversations about, "This is how much money we have. This is what we are spending it on at the moment. What would be a better way to spend it?", as an honest conversation for all our children, our most academically able and those who need a little bit of extra support to reach their potential. One of the many glories of Northern Ireland is its strong community infrastructure and I am sure you have seen that. People here know better than I. Those community conversations happen every day and we need to go in there honestly and say, "We can no longer afford the education system we have. How can we make it better, taking into account children's wellbeing as well as academic attainment?"

Chair: Thank you. I have taken more time than I normally do for my opening questions, but I am going to appeal to colleagues, nevertheless, not to follow my example, but to keep their questions brief and to the point, starting with Jim, who is an exemplar in these matters.

Q259 **Jim Shannon:** That is exceptionally challenging, Mr Chairman. First of all, can I welcome Sir Robert and Koulla? I will delve right into the questions right away. Just recently, Sir Robert, I had occasion to meet the chair of the schools in my constituency and further afield, to be fair, he chairs. He expressed great concern, and the local press did a story about it back home. Every one of those schools is experiencing difficulties balancing their budgets. When it comes to the allocation of moneys it seems, as Koulla said at the very beginning, that when the money comes into the Department, the Department just absorbs that money to cover the negatives within the Department, rather than filtering that through to the schools.

It goes back to my question. How can we better allocate the moneys? Through the confidence-and-supply measure that we have with Government there will be another tranche of money coming through probably fairly shortly. It would be good to have some methodology whereby we can ensure that those moneys are allocated in a better way. I just want to get your thoughts, Sir Robert, on how you think that could be done.

I have another quick question to the two together. When it comes to reforming the education system in a way that would make it more accountable, secure the moneys and get the money to where we need it to be, we have an extreme crisis, as you know and as we all know in this Committee, within the education system at the minute. If we do not address those issues with the schools very quickly then we are in deep stick.

Sir Robert Salisbury: There was absolute confusion about the division of the allocation of funds from the Department of Education, and when we were looking at the library boards and then CCMS—it is now the Education Authority—it was very difficult to pin down just exactly how the money was allocated by those two funding streams. If we could somehow simplify that to one stream it would be easier and clearer, but I



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doubt that any funding formula can really, truly, fairly allocate moneys to the range of schools that we have. There is so much diversity in the governance of schools and how they are run, as I hinted at earlier, that it is incredibly difficult to do that. By altering the formula little by little, all you do is make the unfairness sit somewhere else. It is clear that schools are running out of money. It is clear that there was a laissez-faire attitude to running schools and setting deficit budgets, but the underpinning principle in all of this is the fault that we have too many schools.

Q260 Jim Shannon: The issue very clearly that I have experienced is that the headmasters or principals and the board of governors, who have responsibility for managing the moneys, are telling me that they have cut and pruned to their absolute limit.

Koulla Yiasouma: They have.

Jim Shannon: I do not mean that in the way it sounds, but it is not correct to say that they must save so much more money when they have cut back on teachers and the classrooms are becoming bigger, or when you have boards of governors or PTAs who are fundraising and by their fundraising, which is in some cases substantial, you are paying for a wage of a classroom assistant in a school or you have the purchase of stationery or other things for the school. That is the extremities of what is happening. There must be a stage somewhere where the Education Authority must realise that there has to be a different way. It goes back to my question. How do we have an education system that will better serve the next generation?

Koulla Yiasouma: Within the current system that we have, whether it is the £2.7 billion the Treasury says we allocate to education, I cannot see a better way. I cannot see how we can get more for the money that we spend. You are absolutely right that schools, particularly primary schools, are on their knees. It is quite interesting. I have spoken to parents in primary schools in our most deprived communities who completely understand why at the beginning of the academic year they get a list of things they have to provide, such as pencils and stationery for their children. They understand why that is. Parents are with schools on this.

We have cut this to the bone. Our Education Authority is running at a £90 million deficit, and most of that is because of special education needs. The flexibility in schools' budgets has gone, which means where schools were able to support children with additional special education needs within their own budget, they can no longer do that, so children have to go on the waiting list for an educational psychology assessment, which then puts pressure on the EA budget. Honestly, Jim, I cannot see a way in which, within the way we are currently structured, we can get any more money out of this, that the EA has any more money or that the Department has any more money. I do not see how we can squeeze this lemon any more.



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Jim Shannon: There is no juice left in the lemon. The only thing that is left is the pips.

Koulla Yiasouma: It is as dry as dry can be.

Q261 **Jim Shannon:** Koulla, there is an issue that is very close to my heart and I know it is close to yours. In your presentation at the beginning, you referred to the challenging behaviours of children and the mental health issues and depression issues. I am very aware of it. I deal with it almost every week in my constituency office through myself and through my staff. The levels of depression and mental anxiety among children are extremely high. My understanding is that they are the highest in the whole of the United Kingdom, per head of population.

You mentioned about the quicker assessments for early intervention, because we need the early intervention. We do not need a year or a year and a half for an assessment and then for something to happen. Just last week I had a number of those issues with early assessments. The early assessment had been done, but they had not put anything in place. I am not quite sure whether the resources were there or what the problem is. Anyway, I am just wondering what your thoughts are on whether what we need to do is to have a closer working relationship between health and education, because we need a joint strategy. Maybe the Education Authority and the Department of Health have not really got round to doing that yet. You also referred to poverty and mental health and, again, Mr Chairman, there is a socioeconomic level to this, which cannot be denied.

Koulla Yiasouma: Huge.

Jim Shannon: That is not to take away from other people who have children who are challenging as well, but I see that coming through. Just to back up the point, Sir Robert, you mentioned about one of the categories where we need to address educational underachievement is among the young Protestant males. I know it is an issue for my colleague, who is not a member of this Committee, in East Belfast and it certainly is in my area. How do we address those issues? Sorry, that is a whole lot at one time, Mr Chairman, but those will be my questions and the answers will be much more detailed and helpful.

Koulla Yiasouma: To just start with mental health, you are quite right. Mental health levels are increasing. In Northern Ireland we know that we certainly have the highest levels of suicide and self-harm among children and young people and that is for multiple reasons. One of them could be that we are talking about it more, so people are coming out more.

There is a range of statistics. One in five children and young people will be suffering significant mental health problems by the time they reach 18. In terms of some of the reasons that children themselves have told us, some of it is school stress and exam stress. It is really difficult to reach expectations in some of our highest performing schools. Others reasons include social media. A lot of what is happening to our children



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is happening in the privacy of their own rooms on the phone, and as adults, parents, teachers, carers and grandparents, we do not always see it until it is too late.

There is more happening in children's lives that we just have not caught up with. I do not want to baffle you with figures, but we cannot get away from the fact that it is estimated that 40% of our families in Northern Ireland are experiencing some sort of trauma as a result of the conflict on all sides of the community, both security services and others. That affects today's children. The post-ceasefire children are traumatised because of what has happened in their communities and their families specifically. We are playing catch-up.

You are absolutely right. We are waiting on the Children and Young People's Strategy to come out, but we need better partnerships, not only between education and health, but with communities around the poverty stuff, with families themselves and with the voluntary and community sector. We have a very vibrant voluntary and community sector civil society in Northern Ireland, which provides so many of these services that children and young people are finding very helpful. There is a lot to be done, and what I do know is it is being raised with me constantly when I visit schools. I have the joy of visiting many schools in Northern Ireland and this is their number-one issue, along with special educational needs.

We have to be concerned about those groups of children, including Protestant boys on free school meals, and why that is. Again, that goes back to that triangle of communities, parents and schools, and how we have that conversation across our communities, with our children and with our families, to help them achieve better at school than they have done in the past.

It is not going to help if we keep telling them they are not bright enough. We are consigning them by writing the script. Almost before they enter P1, we write the script: "You are a Protestant working-class boy from Kilcooley in Lady Sylvia's constituency. You are doomed". We need to not send those messages to our children. "You are a Protestant working-class boy from Kilcooley and you are going to do fantastic things". It is sometimes how we talk about our communities, whether it is Kilcooley or whether it is Ballymena. Wherever it might be, we need to talk differently about our communities. We need to talk about their resilience and their optimism, she says having just spent 10 minutes telling you about disadvantaged communities. We need to have more aspirations for these children.

Small schools sometimes are right in our communities in Northern Ireland. Sometimes they are right because it is very rural and we do not want to keep children on buses all day going to school, but we have far too many schools and 63,000 empty desks is far too many for us to be paying for.



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Q262 **Jim Shannon:** Sir Robert, what are your thoughts on the underachieving young Protestant males?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I get frustrated by the echo that always comes through that Northern Ireland has one of the best education systems in Europe. It does not. It is an enduring myth. It has a long tail of underachievement and that long tail of underachievement is still there and it is stubbornly there. It has not really been tackled. Some of the schools I looked at in Belfast were the worst schools I have seen in the whole of the UK, where very few students get any sort of results at the end. It does not come as a surprise to me that Protestant boys in some schools are clearly underachieving.

Q263 **Ian Paisley:** Could you name and shame those schools?

Koulla Yiasouma: That was six years ago.

Sir Robert Salisbury: Would I name and shame them now? No. That would be unfair to the students in them. The success of a school system should be measured on how it treats the least able youngsters in its society, not how it treats the most able. We are always told that Northern Ireland does very well at the top end and it does, but even there there are inconsistencies in the measurement. If you limit the number of students who go into sixth forms, if you set a barrier that says they have to have five or six good passes at GCSE, and you are comparing that with some of the other schools where there are open sixth forms, it is not a fair comparison.

Some of the top schools in Northern Ireland for the top students do extremely well. Often they are exam factories, which creates the stress, but they do very well. I am not decrying them. I have been in some super schools there, but it is the other end that is very stubborn and difficult to move. It is that block of people that come out of those schools that are doing no favours to Northern Ireland and society.

Ian Paisley: I feel you are talking my country down. I have only been in the room 20 minutes, but I must say that I feel you have talked Northern Ireland right into the gutter. Congratulations. If I was a child listening to this, I would be depressed listening to you two.

Chair: What we will do is come back to that when we come to Mr Paisley's questions.

Jim Shannon: Chairman, I just want to say I understand that we are looking at those areas of underachievers and that is the point we are trying to make. Also, for the record, Mr Chairman, I need to put it on record that the exam results in my constituency were exceptional, above the normal. Many more students were achieving the As, Bs and Cs that are necessary. We have an education system that delivers for the majority of students and it is important we say that, but the point I asked was about underachievement and there is a section of underachievers. It is how we address those issues.



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Q264 Maria Caulfield: I just wanted to go back specifically to the funding formula issues, because England has a very different funding formula system, but if you speak to most head teachers, they will also say that they do not have enough money and that schools are at crisis point. It seems to be that there is not a perfect funding formula solution. Given your recommendations, which we have heard in the Salisbury review and which we have heard from other head teachers in other evidence sessions, they very much, even though it is six years later, say that the work that you did would work; it just needs to be implemented. In the six years since you did your report, has any of it been implemented? Has there been any change at all in the funding system?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I am not sure about that, because I have had nothing to do with it. The report seemed to be well received, but in terms of whether it has been implemented or not, certainly the small school allowance has not altered. I could not answer.

Q265 Maria Caulfield: You were asked to do the report by the then Education Minister. Was there no follow-up after you presented that report to either the Minister or any scrutiny committees?

Sir Robert Salisbury: No. I presented it to the Minister, went through the main recommendations and, as far as I was concerned, that was that.

Q266 Maria Caulfield: Is that usual in education circles?

Koulla Yiasouma: It speaks to the point that has been made about how contentious reform in education is, if we are doing what Sir Robert suggested, which was a fundamental redesign of our system in order to make the money work better for all children. The question you have asked several times and I have fudged several times is how we instigate genuine reform in our education system in Northern Ireland that works for every single child. It is very contentious as to how we can progress that. It was then and it remains now.

Q267 Maria Caulfield: Are the recommendations widely supported? We seemed to get the impression from the professionals that gave evidence to us that the recommendations you made made sense and would work. Are they supported by education professionals, and is it that it is politically sensitive?

Koulla Yiasouma: I would say yes, because Sir Robert's report is not the only report. There was an internal report done by the Department of Education in 2017 that made similar recommendations that are not supported politically. It is not just politically; it is also on the ground by parents and communities, which is why I am saying it is not fair just to say, "It is the politicians"; it is not. It is how we have a public discourse about education and how we have that conversation and debate in Northern Ireland. There was a plan to bring all the bodies into one. That did not work, so we have what I would describe as a fudge. We have the Education Authority and we have maintained all the other sectoral bodies, because we cannot agree politically and because there is no appetite



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without the right information, without the right debate and conversations and without making it charged.

Q268 **Maria Caulfield:** Are you saying that even if the Assembly was functioning and there was an Education Minister, it is still unlikely that the recommendations from your review would be implemented?

Koulla Yiasouma: No, I am not saying that. With the previous Education Minister, Peter Weir, and his predecessor, I got an appetite to be up for the conversation and for this sort of debate back home, and looking at how we then bring our children and young people into it. Just in anticipation of further questions, I want to say, as I said at the beginning, I am legally bound to listen to children and young people in Northern Ireland. Nothing I have said or Sir Robert has said is a surprise to any child living in Northern Ireland, regardless of the school that they go to.

Q269 **Maria Caulfield:** I have one final question. It is really around the age-weighted pupil unit, which is the per-pupil funding that we do not have in England. Certainly, from my small rural schools, which are really struggling to keep going, if they do not have their roll numbers they lose a significant amount of funding; it is about £4,000 per pupil. That is not an issue with the current funding formula, but am I right that if we went to the recommendations in your report, it would be much more per-pupil based? If schools were not meeting their rolls, they would suffer financially, but if they got more pupils in, there would be a financial incentive to do so. Is that the shift that you would be recommending?

Sir Robert Salisbury: Yes, but we did put the caveat in there that for some very small rural schools, in places like Fermanagh, where there is no alternative, then they could still retain some sort of additional support for those schools.

Q270 **Chair:** What about the difference that that imposes between secondary and primary education? We have heard in evidence, in terms of disadvantaged primary school pupils, between years 7 and 8 the difference can be as much as £1,300. You make that step from year 7 to 8 and all of a sudden there is a £1,300 gulf and that is causing real problems. Do you have any observations on that?

Sir Robert Salisbury: We did look at this and we felt that at the time it was reasonably fair, but we did recommend that it should be kept under review as situations change. We did anticipate that maybe three or four years down the line a fresh review would be necessary to look at that, to make sure it remained fair.

Chair: I am sure that primary schools would agree with that.

Koulla Yiasouma: I have some significant concerns with regard to the current situation, in that our primary schools have taken quite a significant hit and have lost over £60 per pupil in the last two years, which is why our special educational needs numbers are increasing. That



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is a group of children whose needs, if they are on the register, are met centrally. Our primary schools have taken, I would say, a significant hit. I am not sure I would want to say it is disproportionate, but they are the ones who are really struggling at the moment. It is definitely our primary schools.

Q271 Mr Campbell: The Chairman referred to the outcome of our recent visit to Strabane, where we had quite a significant number of people from across a whole range of sectors. It appeared, from my conversations with people, that even though they were intimately involved in the education sector—some of them were principals, VPs, et cetera—they were up for what is being viewed or what I term as a Bengoa-style overhaul, because they realise the system is broken. That appears to me to be a positive first step. If the people at the coalface are not resisting massive significant change, then that at least means you have a tailwind rather than a headwind.

As you said, Koulla, that is a longer-term project. Most people realise that. There are a couple of things flowing from that. In the overall change that is required, you will be aware that, for example, the recent numbers of pupils going through the transfer tests have hit an all-time high, so there is certainly an appetite for academic selection. Like my colleague, I do take an exception to the education system as a whole being categorised by targeting the people who have not been able to achieve but almost forgetting or setting to one side not just the good achievement at the top but the excellent achievement. Some of our schools are at the top end in the United Kingdom, but for me that is not good enough. That simply is not good enough.

I want to ask a couple of questions on the underachieving groups. In the overall scheme of things, in a Bengoa-style overhaul how would you see the targeting, in an overhaul of that magnitude, to lift up the bottom level, so that we have an overachievement in every sector and every socioeconomic group?

Koulla Yiasouma: That is absolutely the case. You are right. The selective and non-selective school systems are about to level off. 55% are non-selective and 45% are selective, so we are nearly at 50/50 selective/non-selective in Northern Ireland because of the demographic situation.

It is not beyond us in Northern Ireland to have every school a good school. It has been a strapline of our Department of Education for many years, but it is possible. We are a small place. Everyone knows everyone. We have one education authority. I am not looking at narrowing the gap. I am looking at lifting all those children. Some children are not all going to be stratospheric, but too many are being left behind from certain demographic groups for it not to be about the education system.



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Whether we call it a Bengoa-style review, you are right. As I said, we have an unsustainable education system. We are not going to fix it soon if we are going to fix it properly. We have an education system that was designed in the middle of the last century and we are fast approaching the middle of the next century. We need one fit for today's children and for the future children of Northern Ireland. It is transparent; we know what is happening with the money and that has the ability to lift and support all children to meet their maximum potential. I absolutely agree with you. I am not looking to meet them in the middle. There are too many children who are not achieving their best and that is down to us, not children and young people.

Sir Robert Salisbury: You are right. We are beginning to push at an open door. I applaud the stuff that is happening in Strabane and in the Omagh campus. I am beginning to see a move towards more combined schooling and education that benefits all youngsters.

I have seen some superb and incredibly hard-working youngsters in Northern Ireland, and I would not want in any way to decry their efforts. There are also very good teachers, but while ever we have this rump of underachievement that is not really being tackled, we need to look at a different system of doing that. Some of the schools need more frequent inspections and a little more challenge to what they are doing. Some of them need better leadership. Year after year we hear from the inspectorate that some of the leaders are underperforming. That is common across the UK and it needs to be challenged. There are those tougher elements that need to come into it.

You are right, Gregory, in that the mood is beginning to change as economies bite and we are beginning to look at a more flexible system in some of the communities. It seems to me if communities come together to say, "We ought to amalgamate or come together in some way", then there is a possible saving.

I was asked the question earlier—and I forgot to mention this, Maria—about whether anything has happened. One of the things we recommended was a good review of post-16 education, because it seemed to us that far too many schools were running tiny sixth forms that were incredibly expensive, and the funding to run those sixth forms was being taken out of earlier years.

If you are running a tiny sixth form, by definition you can only offer a limited number of subjects. They are very much traditional A-level subjects in Northern Ireland, because we produce a lot of doctors, teachers, pharmacists, et cetera, but there is a newer emergent curriculum that needs to come through. Look at Northern Ireland's film industry. How many schools are offering that sort of A-level that will move towards that?

It seemed to me that a saving would be some sort of combined sixth forms, whether you call them sixth form centres. It is not wholly useful



to simply share sixth forms, because you finish up with logistical problems of trying to put the two or three schools together, which impacts on the curriculum further down and you suddenly have a lot of teachers and youngsters travelling all over the place. There is considerable saving. There is an overlap with what FE colleges do and there is a need there for a rational look at our post-16 education. Communities are beginning to see that now.

To give you a practical example, two of my sons stayed in their small sixth form in England and they could study German and French. The third son went to a sixth form college with 800 students and he could study 11 languages in any combination he liked. I was saying that we need to press more the educational benefits of working together. That is what I have in mind, but it is also financially better.

- Q272 **Mr Campbell:** In my final question, Chairman, I just want to zone in on the issue of underachievement. I am personally aware of some work that has been done targeting underachievement. That that has been the case, particularly in working-class areas, not exclusively but primarily among young Protestants, as you outlined, which has been the case now for probably a generation or more. We have had some recent evidence of sporadic attempts to try to address that. In the overall review, do you not think that this is something that needs to be really at the core if we are going to lift those children up?

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes.

- Q273 **Mr Campbell:** How might that be done? That is the big question. How will that be done in the scope of an overall review that might take 10 to 15 years?

Koulla Yiasouma: We expect a review to look at how we can lift up the children in Sir Robert's long tail of underachievement. You will be aware of some really interesting work that has begun and is ongoing in areas like Shankill, where they are taking a whole-community approach, because of what I said. This is not just about schools; this is about families and the community generally. People are frustrated about how slow that is developing, but we are talking about generational stuff. We are talking about the closures of places of work that our boys used to leave school and walk straight into, whether it was Mackie, Shorts or Harland and Wolff in East Belfast and across Northern Ireland. It is a mindset and cultural change, as well as making sure, like I said, that we do not tell our children they are not good enough, which is what we do sometimes by hiving them off at age 11.

I do not have the solutions, but that is why we need a Bengoa-style review, if we call it that, where we can have international experts, but we can also talk to what our local people, our parents and our children think would work for them and bring the two together, along with the statistics and the evidence, and overlay that with what our children's rights framework tells us. We cannot go far wrong with that as an initial terms



of reference for a review. We are talking about a five to 10-year process, and our crisis is now.

Q274 **Mr Campbell:** Would I be overstating the case to say that the underachieving groups that you have outlined and I have referred to would be a core element of any review?

Koulla Yiasouma: It absolutely has to be. It cannot not be. We have to look at those children who, as I said at the beginning, are furthest away from the standard we expect. We need to have two standards in our education system. We need to be able to find a way of measuring the wellbeing of our children—and the Department of Education is doing some good work, which was begun by the previous Minister—as well as academic attainment. If we use those two standards, then we need to support those children who are furthest away from achieving those standards, and we support them to reach them. It absolutely has to be.

Sir Robert Salisbury: Can I just add, Chairman, that it is a complex thing that Gregory raises, about how you raise underachievement? If I look back at the school I took over many moons ago, which was seventh in the country in terms of poor results, the answer was to raise the achievement and raise the aspirations of everybody in the place, not just the students. It was about blurring the edges where the community starts and the school stops. You had to involve the parents at every stage of the way, and remember that many parents had a poor experience of school so did not want to get involved. You had to devise ingenious ways of getting them over the threshold. You then had to involve local industry and commerce to make sure that the youngsters saw there was a route through once they had left school. You then had to recruit the very best teachers that you could. It is not always an enviable thing, to get the very best teachers into the toughest schools, so we had to pay over the odds to get the very best from the universities to come into those schools. Then you had to set out very clearly what the aspirations for individual pupils were, and you had to monitor that very closely to check that that was working.

Once you get that momentum going in a school and once there is a new vibrancy about the place, then you can change it, but it is not an easy job and it is not a short-term job. It is about the engagement of the communities, raising the aspirations of everybody in the place, linking with local industries and then celebrating the successes that you get. That school was able to move from absolutely no one going to university to 50% going, so it is possible but there are no short-term fixes on that.

That school was in a mining area where all the mines had closed; there are very great similarities with the shipyards in Belfast, where automatically in mining areas you had a good job in the mines. If you worked Saturdays and Sundays you could earn as much as teachers in the Nottinghamshire coalmines, so education did not seem to matter. There is that element in the middle of Belfast. Once the industry has gone, then suddenly education does matter and you have to go with that.



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Q275 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you very much indeed for your evidence so far this morning. Sir Robert, may I just start by repeating back to you something that you said in the very early part of your evidence? That was that you could see the funding crisis in education coming 10 years ago. We did have a functioning Assembly 10 years ago in 2009. Was a blind eye simply turned by the Education Minister? What happened 10 years ago when we saw the funding crisis coming?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I do not know. I asked many head teachers, "Are you running a deficit budget?", and they said, "Yes". This is not in the grant-maintained, voluntary-aided and integrated schools, because they were not allowed to run a deficit budget. Some of the other schools were doing and there seemed a fairly lax attitude to keeping in budget, with very little intervention from the then library boards. I did ask all five library boards, "If you were asked to cover all the costs that you have outstanding at the moment, could you do it?", and none of them could. That is the sort of reason I think that the crisis was looming 10 years ago.

Q276 **Lady Hermon:** Presumably you also asked the relevant Education Minister why we had ended up there.

Sir Robert Salisbury: Yes, I asked.

Q277 **Lady Hermon:** What was the answer?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I tried to follow the funding down to ask who picked up the tab in the end: if the schools run deficit budgets and the library boards do not have enough money, what happens in the end? I could not get a satisfactory answer to that.

Lady Hermon: From the Education Minister?

Sir Robert Salisbury: No.

Koulla Yiasouma: Just to say, in this job and previous jobs I have met with every Education Minister Northern Ireland has had since devolution, and it is fair to say a blind eye has not been turned by Ministers of any political party. It is what I said in response to Maria's question. It is about not having a shared vision of what education should look like in Northern Ireland across the community.

Q278 **Lady Hermon:** A blind eye was not turned to it, Koulla, but we have ended up with principals of primary schools giving us evidence about donations of toilet roll. How have we ended up like that?

Koulla Yiasouma: No, I know. I do not think a blind eye was turned. There was no agreement. We have not been able to reach agreement because we do not have a shared vision. I do not want to put this on the door of the Education Minister, on the door of the Education Committee, certainly not on the door of principals or on the door of previous education library boards and now the Education Authority. It rests on all our shoulders.



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Q279 **Lady Hermon:** With the greatest of respect, I listened very carefully to the reply that Sir Robert gave to my colleague, Maria, about what happened, Sir Robert, to your report. You reported in 2013. Six years ago we had an Education Minister and we had a successive Education Minister, but in reply to Maria you said that nothing had happened to your report. Somewhere, some Minister has to take responsibility. It is a devolved matter to the Northern Ireland Assembly. What happened, Sir Robert, when you went through your report and the recommendations with the Minister? Who was the Minister at that time?

Sir Robert Salisbury: It was John O'Dowd.

Q280 **Lady Hermon:** There seemed to be general acceptance and welcoming of your report in 2013, but nothing appears to have happened to the recommendations.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I just presented the report and assumed that, whatever committees took it over, it would be implemented, but not immediately. I was given some indication that some of them would be longer-term introductions but that it was well received. I do not think much has happened since.

Q281 **Lady Hermon:** Has it just been gathering dust somewhere?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I think so.

Q282 **Lady Hermon:** Sir Robert, do you ask now in the absence of a functioning Assembly? Have you been in touch with the Education Authority? Have you been in touch with the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education?

Sir Robert Salisbury: No, not really. I am getting long in the tooth and this was the last major report. I have kept abreast of it in the newspapers, but I have seen very little alteration to the core values that we said and the core changes that we needed. As I have indicated earlier, we need a rational review of all schools and tinkering at the edge of the funding review is never going to work, because funding is declining. That is why I thought the current problem we have in primary schools with toilet rolls and things was predictable.

Q283 **Lady Hermon:** It was predictable. A number of times, Sir Robert, you also described what you thought was a laissez-faire attitude by principals. I have to say that does not tally with the evidence that we have received from principals, who agonise and have sleepless nights worrying about their budgets. I have to take issue with the description of principals having a laissez-faire attitude to budgets.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I have perhaps used the wrong term.

Lady Hermon: Thank you. It was.

Sir Robert Salisbury: It certainly was not absolutely imperative that principals, six years ago when I was looking at it, ran a budget that was



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not in deficit. Far too many of them said to me, "We are running already a deficit budget", and they did not seem too bothered. That may be classed as laissez-faire. You are not allowed in England to run any kind of deficit budget. That is what I was getting at.

Q284 **Lady Hermon:** Yes, but the system was different in Northern Ireland. It is not the fault of the principals.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I did challenge the library boards on why they did not intervene with the schools when they saw that some budgets were running into negative budgets to challenge as to why that was. As we said in the report, there was not enough intervention from library boards to ensure that people stayed in budget.

Q285 **Lady Hermon:** Since the Assembly collapsed two years ago in January 2017, do you think the Department of Education and the Permanent Secretary should be looking at transforming the school estate? Koulla, you are shaking your head vigorously in the opposite direction.

Koulla Yiasouma: We have area plans, so we have that process in place. We have a process in place that is far too slow and the Permanent Secretary has talked about that in his annual report. We absolutely need to rationalise our estate where schools do not meet the sustainability criteria. We have too many schools that are in millions of pounds worth of deficit, who have had the sword of Damocles hanging over their head for up to a decade in some cases and just need a decision made one way or another. Yes, I believe that needs to be accelerated.

The other thing that can be done is an internal group in the Department of Education recommended that there was a review to look at policies to see where existing policies hindered or exacerbated existing social disadvantage. There comes a place where the Permanent Secretary in the Department can only do so much before they are taking decisions that are political. The legislation that was passed in October does not give them much more scope than they had and nor should it. It is not right that civil servants make these fundamental decisions about reform.

This is why the work of this Committee is really helpful, because if we can trigger those conversations locally, which the area planning process is beginning to do, that will begin the work that has been described for when the politicians come back. The Department can only do so much. Area planning needs to be accelerated and the decisions need to be made quicker. I understand that is part of the transformation programme within the Department at the moment, so I am hoping in the coming months, with the additional resources they have had for transforming, that that will be sped up, because we have too many unsustainable schools. Parents are then voting with their feet and these schools are getting smaller and smaller and more and more unsustainable, and we need to stop that.

Q286 **Lady Hermon:** Moving to a completely different topic that has not been



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mentioned this morning, we received some evidence that there is optimism that there will be a settlement in the pay dispute with teachers. Given the financial crisis that schools are currently suffering and having to tolerate, it is obvious from the evidence we have received that the schools themselves could not pay for an increase in pay. Who should? Which body or organisation should? Should the main Government here in the absence of an Assembly? Who pays for that? Who should meet that bill?

Koulla Yiasouma: Somebody needs to. The schools cannot afford it, nor is it right that our teachers are sitting watching everybody else getting an increase. Our health service workers got an increase, which is absolutely right. They should, but our teachers deserve it. We allow them to care and educate our most precious resource, our children, and we should pay them appropriately. Bearing in mind what I have said about 90% of the existing budget, it needs to come from the central grant. Whether that is from the Department of Education or whether that is from the budget set here in Westminster, teachers should absolutely get their pay rise. Schools cannot afford to do that within their existing budget. That increase has to come centrally.

Sir Robert Salisbury: One of the other things that we have not mentioned that is unusual in Northern Ireland schools is that the mobility of teachers between schools is quite limited. Often teachers join a school and stay for life, so you often finish up with schools where everyone is on the top of all the scales and they have responsibility points. There is no room for manoeuvre in terms of the salary levels in those schools, unlike in England, where there is much more mobility as people move for promotion or whatever and you can then recruit younger, cheaper teachers. That does not happen in Northern Ireland very often. In most of the schools we looked at, nearly all of the staff were on maximum salaries, so they were expensive to run.

Koulla Yiasouma: I am not uncomfortable with that scenario.

Q287 **Lady Hermon:** Could I just come back to the question, Sir Robert, and that is about who should pay for the pay rise that our teaching staff and other staff in schools so deserve? Who should pay? Should central Government pay?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I echo what has just been said here.

Lady Hermon: Not the schools.

Sir Robert Salisbury: No, the schools cannot afford it.

Koulla Yiasouma: They cannot afford it.

Q288 **Lady Hermon:** Since we do not have an Assembly, it should come from a central budget, so it is something that the Chancellor should be looking at in his spring statement.



Sir Robert Salisbury: Yes.

Q289 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you. Excellent. As someone who grew up, went to school and is enormously proud of all the schools I went to—the very small primary school I went to and the subsequent schools I went to—I was startled and taken aback by the reference to an exam factory: “Some of our schools are exam factories”. I have never heard that term used about schools in Northern Ireland. We have children who aspire to do very well. We have parents who aspire for their children to do very well and I do not see teachers in the role of having an exam factory when they have a school. What is the evidence that you have come across in your report to prove or to establish this term, “exam factory”?

Sir Robert Salisbury: There has been a change in education. Maybe the term “exam factory” is a bit harsh.

Lady Hermon: Yes, it is.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I was getting at schools who spoon-feed their students to pass exams at the end, where they are very much teacher-dominated to get them through the examination. That is not a wide enough sort of education that we need. It seems to me that that is a predictability in education: “If you do this, then you will get the exam at the end”, and that is all education is about.

It seems to me that we want, in Northern Ireland particularly, adaptable and flexible people. The world outside is not prescribed as the examinations are. We want people who are adaptable and flexible and who can use imagination. We want people who can work in teams. We want people who are globally aware. All of those issues are very important. They are in some of the very best schools here exactly like that, but in others they are not. It seems to me that if the end is purely the level of exam success you get without all these other things then that might be termed an exam factory.

I am appalled sometimes by the dropout rate. If you spoon-feed youngsters in sixth forms so they do not have the ability to work as independent learners and students, then the dropout rate in universities is quite high. That is what I was getting at.

Koulla Yiasouma: Sorry, but just to reiterate, I have heard the term “exam factory”. I have heard it a lot, certainly since I became children’s commissioner.

Q290 **Lady Hermon:** Used by whom, Koulla?

Koulla Yiasouma: By children themselves; by children attending some of the highest achieving schools in Northern Ireland. They have talked about exam factories. We have facilitated them to have conversations with the curriculum authority in Northern Ireland about the pressures they feel under at exam time, particularly in old money what was the fourth and fifth year and lower sixth and upper sixth, at the exam stress



time. Children and young people have used the term “exam factory”. It is not unfamiliar to me.

In any survey undertaken with children around what stresses them, school will be one of the top two. What we are seeing increasingly, like I said both from the curriculum and from schools themselves, is they are doing a lot more now to try to alleviate pressures on children, either by giving children destressing techniques—I am not sure about that—but also by trying to do things differently themselves.

I do not buy the argument that our highest achieving schools are all about the exams. I have visited those schools—indeed, my children have attended one of those schools—and I have met compassion and care for the children; of course I have. You have a system that judges its schools by one metric and one metric only, which is how many GCSEs are achieved at A to C, including English and maths. I do it; I open the papers and I look for my children’s school. We all do it. When you have that and that is how we judge ourselves as professionals, you can see how it would seep in.

What I will say is that those schools, which is maybe the difference between when you did the work, Sir Robert, and what is happening now, are more mindful and cognisant of that than they have been in the past. If we introduce the second metric of wellbeing, resilience, self-confidence and the ability to go into the world with whatever that world may look like, then we are going to have a very different system. I agree that no teacher and no principal goes into a school thinking, “I am churning out As”. They are not, but I have heard the terms “exam factory” and “school stress” from the mouths of children and young people in Northern Ireland, some of whom attend the highest achieving schools.

Q291 Lady Hermon: What numbers would you be looking at?

Koulla Yiasouma: It is conversations; it is anecdotal.

Lady Hermon: These are anecdotal accounts.

Koulla Yiasouma: Look at surveys. We will be very happy to send through some of the surveys that have been done, not just by my own organisation but by others, which have asked children what the biggest stresses in their lives are. Like I said, school will be one of the top two. I am definitely seeing a shift in attitude towards addressing that.

Q292 Ian Paisley: I am slightly lost. Is the issue for you that there is not enough money in the system in Northern Ireland per se, or is it how the £2.7 billion on average that we get each year is managed and spent? Or is it a little bit of both?

Koulla Yiasouma: The issue is that the £2.7 billion that we have in Northern Ireland for our education system today is not enough. However, could we reorganise ourselves and redesign our system to



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make that money work better? Yes, probably, but it is a longer-term process.

Ian Paisley: It is both.

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes. We need more money in the short term, so that we can reform in the longer term and be more efficient.

Q293 **Ian Paisley:** Facts are fairly stubborn things, and the fact is that there is between 2% and 23% more spending—on that scale—in England, Scotland and Wales per child than there is in Northern Ireland, so it really is about the amount of money that is in the system. Lady Hermon did challenge you on good-results children being dismissed as exam factory products and you say, Koulla, that you have heard the term put to you anecdotally by children saying that they have attended exam factories. Have you challenged them and told them that they are wrong on that?

Koulla Yiasouma: Have I challenged them to tell them that they are wrong? Until I see evidence that they are wrong, no. I have challenged them to have the conversation about how things can be better and then to unpick that a little bit.

Q294 **Ian Paisley:** Excuse me. You have just told us today, by your own evidence, that they are wrong, that your own children are attending exam factories and the results of them. What you have heard is all anecdotal. You have actually told us in your evidence that they are wrong? Have you pushed back on them and said, "You are actually wrong, and that is an insulting term for people who have attended"?

Koulla Yiasouma: If somebody feels something, it is not for me to tell them they are wrong. What it is for me to say is, "If you feel that, what can we do to make it different? What can we do to make you feel different? Let us work out why you feel this. Is it because the school is putting too much pressure on you or is it because of something that is going on for you that means you cannot necessarily cope with the stresses of exams?"

Q295 **Ian Paisley:** I understand that on a one-to-one level, but what about in terms of the whole school being described or dismissed as an exam factory and the impact that has on the high-achieving people who have gone through that? Are you interested in their rights and how they feel about that?

Koulla Yiasouma: None of us go around and say, "All schools in Northern Ireland are exam factories". We do not.

Q296 **Ian Paisley:** I heard it in evidence today.

Koulla Yiasouma: No, I do not think Sir Robert said that and I did not say that. Neither of us said that all schools in Northern Ireland are exam factories. What I have certainly said, in response to Lady Sylvia's question, is that some children have used the term "exam factories" with me.



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Q297 **Ian Paisley:** I am asking whether you have challenged that. Have you gone back and challenged it and said, "Actually, the evidence is different"?

Koulla Yiasouma: The evidence is that children across the piece in any amount of surveys believe that school stress is significant. Whilst we may not say—

Q298 **Ian Paisley:** You are changing the issue to "school stress" now. I am not talking about school stress.

Koulla Yiasouma: No, I am not. It is whether you think the stress is coming from the exam or whether you think the stress is coming from other things in school. We have that conversation: "What is it about school that stresses you? Is it the pressure to do well in academic exams or is it other things?" Of course we have had that conversation. I would not be able to sit here today with the body of evidence that I have without asking children and young people to unpick what they mean by terms like that, but that is not the only conversation we have.

Q299 **Ian Paisley:** I understand that. I am taking from what you have said that, no, you have not challenged; you have not pushed back.

Koulla Yiasouma: I have had conversations with them. I am not telling somebody they should not feel the way they feel.

Ian Paisley: I am not asking you to do that.

Koulla Yiasouma: You have asked me to challenge them and tell them they are wrong.

Q300 **Ian Paisley:** I am asking you to challenge, to push back and to demonstrate evidential values. This term is derisory and it dismisses a significant number of high-achieving young adults in Northern Ireland.

Koulla Yiasouma: When a high-achieving student with 10 A* GCSEs tells me that they attend an exam factory, it is not for me to say that they do not. It is for me to say, "Why is that? How can it be different?" At the risk of repeating myself, I ask what could be different about the school or what could be different about—

Q301 **Ian Paisley:** How should an employer measure attainment? Taking a young person from school, putting them into an apprenticeship or into the employment field, what measurements should they use? Is it exam results?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I am a great believer in value-added measurements to measure exactly what the level of achievement is when a youngster comes in either at the start of a primary school or in year 11 and seeing what value the school adds to that before they leave. It seems to me a critical measurement not the number of As you get but how much value you have added to all of the youngsters in the place. That is my firm measurement.



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Q302 **Ian Paisley:** An employer gets a CV from a child aged between 16 and 18, who wants to start working for them. It says their schools results, their school attendance and maybe the fact they play in a band, go to BB or play in the local GAA or soccer team. What does an employer have to measures them by to bring them into that employment?

Sir Robert Salisbury: We are talking about two points here. First, there is the academic achievement, but what is crucially important is the development of personality and character in schools. All of those other things that come along with academic achievement are vitally important.

Q303 **Ian Paisley:** You do accept that the one measurement that the employer is going to look at is results.

Sir Robert Salisbury: It is one measurement; it is not the only measurement.

Q304 **Ian Paisley:** It is not the only measurement, but it is the key measurement.

Sir Robert Salisbury: No, it is not. There are measurements about the confidence of the youngsters. I used to interview people for medical courses at university, and we often dismissed people who could not converse with us. They had straight As, but they could not say anything when they met a new situation. It is not straight academic achievements; it is much wider than that. It is a whole range of experiences that good schools should offer.

Q305 **Ian Paisley:** I want to turn to the issue of special needs, because it has been mentioned on a number of occasions. It is an issue that perplexes me. I meet regularly with the heads in Ballymena, my own constituency. Certainly in the last meeting I had with them it was the single most important issue with regard to the management or mismanagement of funding. What can be done? Where is the problem in your understanding of why we have come to this crisis in special needs? Is it that special needs schools are no longer being used? Is it that the appeals system for getting a child's statement is no longer appropriate? It is my understanding that there is one person on the so-called appeal board in the Education Authority that actually determines statements. What is your overview of how special educational needs are being handled in Northern Ireland?

Koulla Yiasouma: You are quite right to say that the two issues for school principals are SEN and mental health. It certainly takes up a huge bulk of the legal casework in my office and in a number of other organisations. We have 79,000 pupils in Northern Ireland with some form of special needs, which is 23% of the entire population. We know that the vast majority of the Education Authority's deficit is because of the rising costs of special needs. It goes to what I said earlier. Somebody talked about the lack of suitable early intervention. However, in the old days, when schools had sufficient flexibility in their budget, they were able to bring in support within their own budgets for children



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who they saw struggling early on and support those children and families accordingly. Increasingly, that has not been made available to them.

Therefore, what that has meant is that they have then referred children to be assessed for a statement of special educational needs, which requires an educational psychologist to do it. That means that what all educational psychologists are mainly doing in Northern Ireland is assessing for special educational needs, doing statement assessments, instead of what they would have done previously, which is support schools to support the children. What is happening is more children are not getting early intervention and support within school, because schools do not have the support or budget to do that, and they are going on a waiting list to be assessed for a statement.

Q306 **Ian Paisley:** You are talking about children at a particular level. I am talking about a very fundamental problem. The issue that has been put to me is that in primary schools you have high-dependency, medical-need children, who require, in some instances, two people to look after them for their own wellbeing and survival. They are in the space of, if I can use this term, an everyday classroom. That is putting pressure on pupils, the learning environment and teachers and how they teach, because of the lack of support.

Koulla Yiasouma: You are quite right. What I was going to go on to say was that the pressure then goes up the way.

Q307 **Ian Paisley:** How common a feature is that scenario I have outlined to you?

Koulla Yiasouma: The scenario of a child with that high level of medical needs is not that common.

Q308 **Ian Paisley:** Really? Out of all my primary schools in Ballymena, nearly every one of them had a situation like this.

Koulla Yiasouma: Let me be clear. We have too many children who are not getting their needs met through the statement. The statement is a statutory instrument. The Education Authority is obliged to provide the service that is in a statement. What we are seeing are less specific recommendations about what a child should get. In the old days, it would say that a child needed individual adult support or, in the case you are describing, two adults for the whole school day. We are seeing less of that. We are seeing, "The child needs adult support for two or three hours a day. It could be shared with another child". I agree with you 100%: what we are seeing is children not getting their needs met through the statement and then having to appeal the statement through what is called a SENDIST.

Q309 **Ian Paisley:** How long does that appeal system take on average?

Koulla Yiasouma: I do not have the answer for you on that one, and I am very happy—



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Q310 **Ian Paisley:** Would you be surprised that it is nearly a year?

Koulla Yiasouma: I am not surprised. What I am also not surprised about is that we have children waiting to be assessed for a statement for years. We have children, Mr Paisley, like the children you have described, going to school at age four and their statement still not being agreed until the August, when they were born with the condition they had. That cannot be right. Children with disability and special educational needs are one of the biggest causes for concern that I have, which is why my office is doing a review.

Q311 **Ian Paisley:** Would you say this is a crisis point?

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes. It is beyond that. I was trying to describe to Sir Robert the situation with SEN, and I cannot think of a word beyond "crisis". We are beyond a crisis on SEN, and it is the thing that I lay awake at night worrying about. More importantly, I know our principals and our teachers, from P1 right through, lay awake at night worrying about it.

Q312 **Ian Paisley:** I must say that I commend the teachers, certainly the ones I have met, the Ballymena heads of primary, for the work they have done. Under very stressful circumstances, they are managing a terrible situation. I agree that something does need to be done urgently.

Briefly, on underachievement, which has been the focus of part of our discussion today, for the last 20 years we have known about underachievement. This is the issue of children leaving school and going straight into Mackie's. Mackie's closed 20 years ago. It is second-generation now. Most children do not even know what Mackie's was; most parents do not even know what it was. We have known about this for 20 years. We have spent over £40 billion in the last 20 years on education, knowing about underachievement. Has that been a waste of money?

Koulla Yiasouma: Of course not.

Q313 **Ian Paisley:** We still have the same levels of underachievement, according to what you have put to us today. The levels of underachievement are dire.

Koulla Yiasouma: Just to qualify the statistics—

Ian Paisley: We have spent £40 billion, knowing about underachievement for the last 20 years. Today, children go out the other side like a sausage machine; nothing has changed. Who is to blame? Is it the educators? Is it the Government? Who is to blame? Is it the children? Someone is to blame here.

Koulla Yiasouma: It is definitely not the children.

Q314 **Ian Paisley:** It is definitely not the educators. It might be the politicians. Who is to blame? Is it the educators?



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Koulla Yiasouma: It goes back to Lady Sylvia's question and Ms Caulfield's question. Why are we not implementing recommendations like the Salisbury review? It is because we cannot get political and community agreement on the best way forward for our education system. Could that £40 billion have been better spent?

Q315 **Ian Paisley:** Hang on a minute. That is all fine and dandy. These kids have been coming to school for the last 20 years. Now they are adults; they have come out of the other end. They have been coming to school; they have been educated by teachers who know this is a problem. You are telling me that the results are as rubbish today as they were then.

Koulla Yiasouma: They are doing the best they can within a system that is not working for those children. That is my answer to you. That system need to be better for them and particularly for children and young people.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I felt I made my answer to this question clear earlier on. You have to have better leaders of schools; you have to put more money into those sorts of schools; you have to have better links with the community. You have to do all these things that we have already touched on before it will make an impact.

Q316 **Ian Paisley:** We have spent £40 billion on this.

Sir Robert Salisbury: If you have spent £40 million and nothing has happened—

Ian Paisley: It is £40 billion.

Sir Robert Salisbury: If you have spent £40 billion and nothing has happened, then it was not the right approach. My view is that you have to be a lot harsher with the leadership and in terms of the demands on outcomes in those schools. You have to monitor that a lot more closely.

Q317 **Ian Paisley:** Do you name and shame bad schools and bad teachers?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I would try to get rid of poor teachers.

Q318 **Ian Paisley:** It is impossible.

Sir Robert Salisbury: It is not impossible, but it is not easy in Northern Ireland.

Q319 **Ian Paisley:** We have wasted £40 billion. That is essentially what I am taking from this today in terms of underachievement.

Koulla Yiasouma: It is not a waste of £40 billion. It is just whether that £40 billion could have been more effectively—

Q320 **Ian Paisley:** It is too late. It cannot be re-spent. We cannot re-spend it.

Koulla Yiasouma: Then it is the next £40 billion we need to look at.

Q321 **Ian Paisley:** It will take 20 years to fix.



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Koulla Yiasouma: It should be over the next 10 years. It will take 10 years to fix, absolutely.

Q322 **Ian Paisley:** It is not a very hopeful picture you have painted today, I must say.

Koulla Yiasouma: We can only tell it like it is.

Q323 **Chair:** Can I ask about targeted social-need funding? We have heard evidence that this particular element within the common funding formula is perhaps unduly focused on schools that have been deemed to require extra support because of the number of children who have free schools meals. We have heard that from, you will not be surprised to hear, those schools that feel they have been on the whip end of this. They feel that, because of the way this particular element is designed, they are disadvantaged and therefore struggling. Do you have anything to say about that?

I think I can predict what you are going to say, given your previous remarks, but the proposition is that this particular element is poorly designed and is stripping a disproportionate amount of resource away from schools that are middle of the road in terms of social disadvantage as measured by the number of children with free school meals.

Sir Robert Salisbury: We looked at many different methods to ascertain where funding should go. A lot were very complicated and difficult to administer. We came down, in the end, to free school meals being the most efficient way. The results we got from all of the other trials were very similar. In the report, we said that for the time being free school meals would be the best measurement of social deprivation, but, if something better came along a few years down the line, that would be okay. That is why we settled on that.

Koulla Yiasouma: It is right that we target additional resources to children who are known to be disadvantaged because of their particular circumstances. One of the challenges I have with the additional monies that go in under the common funding formula is that education and schools do not have to report on how they spent it on the children for whom they were targeted. In England, when additional resource is reported on, a school has to show how that group of children benefited or how they were lifted. We do not have that in Northern Ireland, nor is it right to have it in this current climate, because of where we are at.

Q324 **Chair:** I am sorry, but can you unpick that a bit? From what you have suggested, that system works quite well in England.

Koulla Yiasouma: I am not saying it works well. What I am saying is that in England they report on how they spend the money on those children. In Northern Ireland it goes into the general pot with the scenario that a rising tide lifts all boats. Actually, that money is meant for those children who are in boats that are leaking, to plug the leak. In Northern Ireland, however, we do not report how that additional money



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is spent to support the children for whom it is targeted. Do you see what I mean?

Q325 **Chair:** Schools in England do report on that.

Koulla Yiasouma: England does report it.

Q326 **Chair:** What sorts of things would they therefore say? In schools in my constituency, children who are disadvantaged socially, economically and financially are not educated separately from children who are not in that category.

Koulla Yiasouma: It could be used on some additional supports. It could be used on things like books, things that their parents cannot buy for them that other parents can. It could be used on all sorts of things that will help equalise. It goes back to Mr Campbell's thing about how we lift these children. That money is supposed to help lift those children. Going back to the point about whether this money is being properly spent, we do not actually know how much of this additional money has helped in the education of those groups of children and young people. It is not about educating them separately; it is about giving them the additional support that they may need to level the playing field.

Q327 **Chair:** You are suggesting that perhaps better reporting would be helpful.

Koulla Yiasouma: There should be mandatory reporting on how that money is spent, yes.

Chair: Okay, that sounds sensible.

Q328 **Mr Goodwill:** I would like to take us back to the fundamental issue of funding. Sir Robert, your report was commissioned because it was understood that there is a problem with school segregation, surplus places, small schools and all of those kinds of things. It seems that no politician has had the courage to make decisions that are in the short term unpopular but in the long term will benefit the children in Northern Ireland.

While I have been listening to your evidence, I have been trying to think about what could happen to break this logjam. In the meantime, we are going to have more demands on the Treasury, whether it is confidence-and-supply money or new money coming in to prop up the existing system. At some point, something has to change. What would have to happen before that could take place? We would have to see a restoration of the Executive, presumably. We would also have to see a Chancellor of the Exchequer prepared to attach strings to new money for education. I cannot see any other way that this would actually happen. Maybe you are more optimistic than me.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I am not more optimistic. You have summed up my arguments exactly. Tinkering at the edge of the formula will not make a great deal of difference. It is a structural root-and-branch



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change that needs to happen, but who takes the tough decisions on that and the flak that comes with it? I am glad I am not a politician, really.

- Q329 **Mr Goodwill:** In England, we moved to a fair funding formula. That created winners and losers. What happened then is Justine Greening had to go to the Chancellor and say, "Look, I want some money to cushion the losers, because you cannot have that situation". In the short term it could cost us more to transition.

Koulla Yiasouma: It will.

- Q330 **Mr Goodwill:** You are going to have to compensate those losers, certainly in the short term. Can you see that happening?

Sir Robert Salisbury: We were moving towards a system of fair funding, knowing that there would be some losers in there who you would have to compensate, yes. Whether I can see it happening in Northern Ireland in the near future, I do not know.

Koulla Yiasouma: What other option do we have? Do we tell those children who we have identified as the most disadvantaged, who have disabilities and special educational needs, "We are sorry but we do not have enough money to give you a decent education"? That is the alternative, and that is just not fair. That is not right.

- Q331 **Maria Caulfield:** On special educational needs, to take up the points Ian was making, in England we have moved away from statements to EHC plans. They are by no means a panacea. There are still significant problems, including waits and challenges to decisions, but would that system improve the statement system that currently exists in Northern Ireland?

Koulla Yiasouma: In Northern Ireland, we have been reforming our SEN system since 2006. We passed legislation in 2016, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland). The Assembly fell before we could pass the regulation and the code of practice. There was a discussion about moving away from the statement, and that was resoundingly rejected. We came up with a different way forward, but we have not yet implemented the new system.

- Q332 **Maria Caulfield:** Given that it got so far in the process, is that something the Permanent Secretary could do?

Koulla Yiasouma: The draft regulations have been consulted on and we are waiting on the code of practice to be consulted on. We absolutely need to reform our system, to introduce the Act that was passed by our Assembly and implement it. However, it does introduce some of the learning from England and some other ways forward. We come back to the same situation, however. Until we have enough early intervention and prevention and enough wiggle room in existing school budgets to support those children, the only port of call will be the statement. We are not moving away from the statement; it is a different sort of statement. The idea is that more children are supported outside of the statementing



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processes. That is going to require additional cash, bearing in mind that the system is overspent as we speak. Yes, we absolutely need to accelerate the implementation of the SEND Act.

Q333 **Maria Caulfield:** Could that be done without the Assembly?

Koulla Yiasouma: You have identified that the Secretary of State could propose legislation here. I would argue that there are a number of legislative priorities for children and young people, and this is absolutely one of them. However, we would have quite a long list, and it is ever growing. It is getting really quite difficult. I do not want to overegg it, but it is really hard. We are spending today's money on policy priorities that were made three years ago. The world has moved on; our children and young people have moved on. There are a lot of things where we need to move on, and we need our politicians to do that for us and with us.

Q334 **Lady Hermon:** So it is really important for the Assembly to be re-established and functioning again.

Koulla Yiasouma: Of course. For the record—I have said this a lot of times—I do not underestimate the determination and commitment of all parties in Stormont to bring back the Assembly. I recognise the current difficulties, but, like I said, at what price for our children and young people? I am not blaming one person or another, but we need somebody to make decisions for us locally. It is only elected politicians who can do that.

Lady Hermon: Yes, it is rather difficult.

Sir Robert Salisbury: There was one thing we looked at in 2013. Northern Ireland has a very large number of classroom assistants. They are usually linked to the needs of individual children. We did wonder whether it would be worth looking at the needs of the school rather than the individual children, to see just how effective classroom assistants are. Very little research has been done into that yet, but it might be something worth looking at, because they are very expensive.

Koulla Yiasouma: Sir Robert, we have been here two hours and we have found the one thing we disagree on. It was going to happen sooner or later. We must always look at the needs of the individual children. Is there a more effective way of doing something? It could be a revision of classroom assistants, but we must always look at the individual needs of our children. That is how we should assess them.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I was not saying that. I was saying that there is a possible review here that might be undertaken.

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes, there is. You are absolutely right.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I have not read anywhere a review of how effective some classroom assistants are and what they actually do.



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Koulla Yiasouma: There is some evidence that suggests that this does need to be reviewed. The Northern Ireland Audit Office said that both the Department of Education and the Department of Health cannot prove value for money for the over £200 million spent on SEN in Northern Ireland.

Chair: That is a thoughtful note on which to end. Thank you very much indeed for being with us today. What you have said is very insightful and will certainly help us compose our report. Thank you.