Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Special Educational Needs

15 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Conall McDevitt
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mrs Dorothy Angus	)	Department of Education
Ms Gillian Boyd	)	
Ms Debbie Gladwell	)	
Mrs Irene Murphy	)	

The Chairperson:
We are glad to have with us Dorothy Angus, director of access, inclusion and well-being; Irene Murphy, head of the special education inclusion review team; Debbie Gladwell, head of the special education team; and Gillian Boyd. You are all very welcome. Dorothy, I ask you to take the lead and make the presentation.

Mrs Dorothy Angus (Department of Education):
Thank you, Mr Chairman. Good morning, members. Thank you for the invitation to present to

you this morning. You have a detailed set of slides in front of you. We are not going to go through every inch of those, but I hope that they will provide some backcloth. I apologise to members who have already been subjected to some of this material, but we are conscious that there are new members, and we hope that this background briefing will be helpful. The Committee will, of course, have an opportunity to consider issues, such as the review of special educational needs, in more detail when the Minister brings forward final proposals.

I now turn to the presentation. The first important point to make is that there is a comprehensive and robust legislative framework for special educational needs (SEN). The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 states:

> "A child has 'special educational needs' if he has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for him."

A child with a learning difficulty is defined as someone who has:

> "a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his age".

If you look at our themes, you will see that that is a broad, not a specific, definition of the condition. At its heart is the principle that children are supported according to their learning need and not in accordance with any label or diagnosis.

The framework, then, puts duties on the education and library boards and schools' boards of governors to identify and provide for children and young people with special educational needs. The 1996 Order marks the start of a more contemporary approach to special educational needs, where they were mainstreamed and recognised as an integral part of education provision.

Actually, it probably started earlier than that, but the Order enshrined it. It is also the beginning of the inclusion agenda, which was strengthened by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO). There is more, of course, to inclusion than just children being educated in mainstream schools; it is about the children feeling a full and valued member of the school population. The legislation is accompanied by published practical guidelines in an extensive code of practice, as well as a dispute resolution and information service and a statutory appeals body, which is the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST). The code of practice sets out five stages of assessment and provision, right up to the statement of special educational need.

I turn to some of the key statistics. Currently, about 4·2% of the school population, which is almost 14,000 children, have statements, but over 19% of the school population, which is almost 65,000 children, are on the SEN register. The first graph that we have provided illustrates graphically the rising numbers of people with SEN, so there is an upward trend from 14·6% in 2003 up to where it is now. An important development in SEN provision is the shift of focus to mainstream schools. The code of practice was developed with a view that most SEN can be identified and addressed in mainstream settings. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Order gave parents increased rights to choose mainstream education. Going back to our main statistics, 93%, which is 60,000 pupils with SEN, are in mainstream schools.

The subsequent graphs relate to statemented children. Most children in special schools will be statemented. There has been a very small rise of about 9%, but the rise in mainstream is 94%. In the following slide, which is broken down by the settings, you can see that there has been a very small rise in the special setting this past year. There has been a rise in primary, which, interestingly, has started to even off, but the rise is still continuing in post primary, picking up the previous rise in primary. That is not to say that there is any presumption or policy of abandonment of special schools. Indeed, the figures show a solidly based need and a steady parental choice for them. Rather, the provision has become more mixed on the basis of parental preference. There is a much greater expectation on mainstream schools to be able to provide for children with SEN. I emphasise the point about the continuing place for special schools because, during the consultation, there was a misunderstanding that there was some agenda to close special schools. Nevertheless, it is an important shift and an important backcloth to the review and to the need for capacity-building in mainstream schools, about which we will talk shortly.

The following slide covers the SEN incidence. I am not going to go through that in any detail. The next three slides summarise the educational outcomes for pupils with special needs, compared with those without SEN. The point to note is that SEN children are not performing as well. Although many of those children have cognitive difficulties, which may limit their learning, very many others, with support and/or relevant teaching strategies, are capable of achieving as well as their peers. Our challenge is to ensure that that happens. The better picture, if we look at the columns vertically, is that the outcomes are improving at all SEN stages. There are more school leavers now with SEN who have A levels and GCSEs than are leaving without qualifications. The special needs agenda is very much part of the raising standards agenda. It is integral to the business of a school.

In funding terms, some £205 million was expended on SEN provision in 2009-2010. That is the spend by the boards' services and by the schools. It is just over 10% of the education budget.

I turn to some of the ongoing development issues that we are looking at. You will be aware of the autism agenda. When the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was passed, the Department already had a well advanced draft strategic framework for autism within the existing legislative framework. We will, of course, continue to work with DHSSPS and other Departments to ensure that it is adapted to a cross-departmental strategy. We continue to work with colleagues in the Department of Education and Skills on the plan for the future of the Middletown Centre for Autism.

On the Bamford review, which is led by the Health Department but on which we are very much engaged, we have been contributing not just in respect of special educational needs but on work around good emotional well-being and the promotion of good mental health.

The transition of young people with SEN to further education, higher education, employment, training or social care settings is an important departmental issue, and we have been leading an interdepartmental group on the subject for a couple of years.

Speech and language continues to be big focus for us, because it is one of the highest incidences of SEN, and, of course, communication is key to learning. In addition, there has been some focus on SEN in Irish-medium education, using immersion education.

At this point, I will hand over to Irene Murphy, who will provide an update on where we are in the review.

Mrs Irene Murphy (Department of Education):
First, I will provide background on why the review of special educational needs and inclusion was initiated. It was undertaken because of inconsistencies and delays in SEN assessment and

provision for children in schools. Over the years, a series of Education and Training Inspectorate reports have told us that there are differences in how schools determine the need for support and that some schools are better at supporting special educational needs than others.

As you have already seen from the graphs and histograms, there are increasing numbers of children with special educational needs, both with and without statements. As you have seen, the percentage of children on the SEN register has increased from 14% in 2003-04 to those covered by the latest statistics in 2010-11 of 19·7%. The review found that at least 25% of the school population has some kind of barrier to learning, including almost 20% with SEN, and it looked at whether the barriers to learning faced by children in schools were long term or short term, a result of SEN or disability, or perhaps another factor such as family or personal circumstances.

The review also found that there are mounting pressures on parents, teachers, schools and boards to make provision for the increasing numbers. Generally, schools are faced with greater numbers of children presenting with a broader range and increased complexity of need. In addition, schools were found to be looking for external support for around 40% of children with special educational needs, and it was felt that there was a need for clear accountability on spend and educational outcomes.

Key themes emerged from the review. It was felt that there is a need for a focus on early identification, assessment and intervention. It is crucial to identify children’s needs as soon as possible after they arise, whether in early years settings or in primary or post-primary stages. There is a need to ensure consistency of provision across schools and boards, so that all children have access to the same level of assessment and provision without undue waiting times. It was felt that there is a need to effectively build capacity in schools and to optimise resources available for special educational needs provision. We tried to envisage a less bureaucratic system, with all schools’ capacity at a level equivalent to that currently attained by the best performing schools.

In addition, it was found that there is a need to develop opportunities for collaborative working across the disciplines that work with children in schools, including education and health. Furthermore, there is a need to disseminate and better share existing good practice, as evidenced through Education and Training Inspectorate reports, among special schools, mainstream schools, nursery schools and playgroups. There is a need to ensure that the needs of all special educational needs pupils are met effectively, including those in mainstream schools, who account for the vast majority of children with special educational needs.

Another theme to emerge was the need to ensure that schools are equipped to recognise and deal with diversity and with children facing barriers to learning. All the themes were set in an overarching and inclusive framework aimed at raising standards and outcomes for all children while maintaining the diversity of special schools, special units and mainstream classes.

The consultation period ran from August 2009 to January 2010. It was extended on a number of occasions, because of the high level of interest. We had approximately 3,000 consultation responses. Of those, we had almost 800 in written format from about 850 respondents. We had four campaigns with over 700 respondents and three petitions with around 1,300 signatories.

The summary of the report is currently under consideration by the Minister, prior to publication, and we are working through an analysis of the responses against the key policy proposals. That work is almost complete. As we move forward, we are taking into consideration the breadth of supportive comments or other comments expressed during the course of the review to develop policy options. They will have been informed by the feedback from the consultation and will be considered by the Minister in due course.

As we are moving forward, one of the key themes relates to building the capacity of staff in the school sector. We are moving forward with a number of capacity-building projects. I am particularly involved with two capacity-building projects: one on early years and children with special needs or disabilities, and one on level A educational testing in mainstream schools. Those will be moving forward soon. We will have a pilot process of between two to three years. Subsequently, we will move into a formal evaluation and monitor the pilots. We will aim to have that completed by September 2013.

The early years setting intends to improve early identification and assessment across statutory nursery schools or units and the Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) funded settings, which are the voluntary and community sector settings that are funded by DE.

The key objective of the pilot is to enhance readiness for the P1, or foundation, stage for children, to improve the skills of the preschool practitioners and to develop more common consistency across those settings. It is also looking to determine the correct balance of external supports available within those settings, and, importantly, to provide a pathway to a future best-practice model.

The level A educational testing pilot is in mainstream schools, and its aim is to improve the capacity of the special educational needs co-ordinators or teachers in schools to identify and assess pupils, thereby resulting in an improvement in the delivery of relevant and purposeful interventions at an early stage. Through that pilot, we hope to see a development of the school expertise in house, expertise in educational assessment, and improved understanding in the terminology of assessment reports that are completed in the school or outside, thereby improving communication to parents on the identified needs of the individual children.

Mrs Angus:
Gillian will tell us about the broader capacity-building programme that we have been doing for the school workforce.

Ms Gillian Boyd (Department of Education):
I am on loan from the Education and Training Inspectorate, where I inspect special education throughout the sectors. I began the capacity-building programme last January, when I took up this temporary position. We have based the programme very firmly on an analysis of the needs in schools. The evidence came from inspection findings over the past eight years and observations during inspections and the preferences of teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), principals, and a wide range of others throughout the education system.

We asked what teachers wanted to address with SEN in their schools and how they would prefer to have that development delivered. The teachers were very clear about what they wanted. They knew that there was exceptionally good practice throughout the sector. They know that from reading other people’s inspection reports, surveys and discussions within their profession.

I have very often been asked while on inspections, “Where do I go to see really good, outstanding practice? What does it look like? Where can I find it?” We have examples of schools in which there is outstanding practice. We aim to disseminate those skills and practice throughout the system. The programme also aims to use the resources that we already have to best effect. We have that expertise in our schools both for the leadership and management of SEN and the skills in the classroom. In addition, DE has spent £500 million on ICT in schools.

Over the year, we have held 13 capacity-building leadership and management events for school leaders, special educational needs co-ordinators and other teachers. We plan six further events. The events have been filmed and put on the C2K network for schools to access. They give examples of outstanding and very good practice in leadership and management for SEN delivered by practitioners from the schools. The programme has been incredibly well received by the school sector. Of the 420 attendees that we have had so far, only one found the event less than useful. I have to say as a postscript that that school had particularly good practice and did not feel that it could learn further from colleagues.

A joint event was held between the Department of Education and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, because we recognised that there is a very swiftly growing need for speech and language skills, particularly in early years. The event aimed to promote collaborative working between teachers and therapists in schools and share and disseminate the really good practice that we have in some of our schools. All 150 conference attendees found it useful or very useful to their practice.

We have developed a resource file of effective practice for SEN in schools. That is being delivered to schools at the moment. It was written by teachers and practitioners in our system for other users in our system, which is its strength. Small teams of teachers, education and library board officials and therapists came together and wrote practical advice for use in the classroom. It has 13 sections and, so far, we have had extremely positive feedback. There is Education and Training Inspectorate evidence that the file is already being very well used in schools. It has been delivered to schools only for the past four weeks.

From that file, we are developing e-learning materials for the continuing professional development of school staff. That will help schools to organise their SEN provision and meet the needs of their pupils through all-school development. We already have evidence that schools are using the resource file in that way, so we are producing documentation to help them organise that. We are planning a resource file to address SEN, in early years settings in particular, based on the Belfast Education and Library Board resource that has just been released. It will have a very strong focus on developing speech and language skills. Without adequate skills in those areas, children will not be able to learn to read.

A strand of workshops for SEN will be held as part of the Regional Training Unit summer school this year. Last summer, approximately 20% of our school workforce attended the summer schools. We expect a good number of teachers to attend the workshops. We have a business case in preparation to support a project to provide continuing professional development for teachers to develop further their capacity to teach reading, spelling and independent writing skills to children of primary school age, including those with special educational needs.

The proposed course will not only address issues related to the impact of any disability that might impede progress in literacy — for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, speech and language difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a general learning difficulty — but also those hidden factors, such as limitations in the working memory, which may cause children without any recognised special educational need to underachieve in their literacy. As you say, Mr Chairman, that is a huge problem in schools, particularly in post-primary schools. If you cannot read adequately for the curriculum, you are impeded in every part of your school career.

The project is based on specialist expertise and recent research in our own schools. It is not imported from outside. It will enable teachers in primary schools to identify and meet the needs of all children, including those with literacy difficulties who require specialist intervention in the school, increase efficiency and reduce costs in the education system. The programme relates directly to the skills that teachers need under 'Count, Read: Succeed', which is a strategy to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy. There is a need to address children's difficulties as early as possible. Research shows us that where we provide intervention at the age of six to seven, there is an 80% success rate for children with those difficulties. If you leave that intervention until the age of 10, there is only a 20% chance of those children becoming successful.

In addition, a continuing professional development (CPD) programme has just been written to address the needs of children with sensory processing disorder (SPD). That is a hidden disability for some children. The programme will develop teachers' skills to teach children with a sensory processing difficulty. There are approximately 7,000 children with autism in the school system, and most of them will have that problem. However, it will also address the needs of many children with a wide range of learning difficulties who find it difficult to focus and concentrate in the classroom.

The Chairperson:
Thank you. That is one of those areas where I wonder where to start. We had a process on special educational needs and inclusion going back to 2009. It probably started earlier than that. We have been given some indication today that it will be 2013 before we have the pre-implementation capacity-building pilots. During all that time, according to the slides, the number of children with special educational needs or statemented children will go up in post-primary schools. However, for some unknown reason, it seems to be going slightly down for primary school children. I am interested to hear your comments on the reasons for that.

The previous Education Committee did extensive work on this matter, and held a very successful event in the Great Hall. At that stage, the issue of how we get quick and appropriate early intervention was highlighted. I happened to look up what the Children's Law Centre said about the co-ordinated support plans. It was very scathing. It said that, at that stage, the proposal:

> "seems to be based upon an unfounded, untested assumption that the provision of teacher training within the mainstream sector will effect a major reduction in the need for special educational provision as defined in Article 3(4)(a) of the Education (NI) Order 1996. An attempt to correlate teaching training and capacity-building within mainstream schools with the level of special educational need in the school population is completely illogical."

Given all that, Dorothy, the simple question is: where are we going with all this? I have serious doubts. Although there is good practice and some children's needs are being met, the trajectory is on an upward path, with more children being identified as having special educational needs. However, we are going to have a process that many in the system are not convinced is the right model to use, and that is going to run until 2013. We will then be looking at this issue again, and we will still have major problems with special educational needs. Is there not a quicker way of addressing the particular needs of children with special educational needs?

Mrs Angus:
There is an upward trajectory in the number of children on the special educational needs register, spanning a very broad spectrum of children, from those with some learning difficulties up to statemented children. We hope that we have, through the capacity-building programme, started to address some of those issues, by getting children the help that they need quickly. If children have speech and language difficulties or dyslexia, those kinds of issues can be addressed in the school. Teachers recognise it and have the confidence to put in place the kinds of interventions that are needed. That is going on while the review continues to look at the systemic way that we deal with special educational needs. Hopefully, that will start to address children's needs.

The Chairperson:
But, Dorothy, how is that done, given that educational psychology services are so badly stretched, and a school has an allocation of, perhaps, only one session a week, yet that school could identify 20 children who should be receiving that help? Although I appreciate that it is important that we get a policy in place, the current practice for dealing with the needs of children in the classroom is not working and we have a scandal in relation to the waiting times for psychology services. It seems as though that issue is not being addressed in a way that is meeting the needs of children. Some children are not even a statistic in the school — the school is just aware that they are there. Those children are not being registered in a way that recognises that they really do need psychology services. Because they do not fit within the school's allocation, those children are not having their needs met. Surely we cannot allow that situation to continue.

Mrs I Murphy:
We have referenced the Education and Training Inspectorate reports that have demonstrated that there is very good practice, but there is also mixed practice in schools. One of the other things that has been identified most recently is that there has been inappropriate identification of SEN. Some schools may be identifying children with SEN when they do not have SEN, or vice versa. The capacity-building programme that is already in schools — and will continue — aims to make sure that teachers and special educational needs co-ordinators are best placed to identify such children more quickly, so that they can put in place the necessary interventions, whether it is a reading programme or another kind of intervention. It aims to help them to identify those children and have their needs addressed without unnecessary recourse to the educational psychology services, so that, over time, the educational psychologists' time will be better spent dealing with children with greater needs or supporting schools or settings where children have more challenging needs. That work is already under way.

The Chairperson:
If you take the learning support co-ordinators, for example, is that going to include the whole issue around diagnostic testing? At the event that we held, a number of individuals commented on the importance of guarding against a situation where people who are not qualified are making assessments on individual children, as that ends up creating a far worse situation.

Mrs I Murphy:
I think that there was, perhaps, a misunderstanding of what the review meant by diagnostic testing. There was not intended to be any suggestion that teachers or schools would be required to carry out a medical diagnosis of children. It was intended that the term “diagnostic” would already be familiar to teachers in relation to literacy assessments.

The level A educational testing pilot tries to test the proposals in the review for what was then described as low-level diagnostic testing but which is, in fact, educational assessment. It aims to enhance the skills of special educational needs co-ordinators and other teachers in schools through a series of pilots across Northern Ireland by showing them how to identify the children affected, which tests are the best ones to use, how to understand and interpret the results of those tests, and how to put in place provision right away without, again, having to wait for a psychologist.

The Chairperson:
I have a final initial question. What was the outcome of the responses to the statementing process? Although it is obviously desirable to move from five to three, the fear was that that was an attempt to completely take out statementing as a legal framework in order to make the process easier, so that what we would really have is just a regime about assessment as opposed to statements, which include legal provision for the rights of an individual child. Where are we as a result of the review on that matter?

Mrs I Murphy:
It is fair to say that there have been mixed responses to the proposals on that legal framework. The review proposals per se really had no intention of reducing the rights of children with special needs. If you look at the figures, you will see that it is only those children with statements at stage 5 who actually have very significant legal rights, and yet we have 60,000 other children as well. One of the intentions of the review was to try to look at how the rights of all of those children could best be progressed.

Mr McDevitt:
I want to pick up on the consensus, which you seem to be able to form on the basis of the data, that early intervention pays off. I would like you to clarify a couple of things that I have noticed from the graphs. The first is about the 2008-09 cohort. The pupils with SEN at stage 1 and 2 seemed to outperform quite exceptionally the corresponding pupils in the previous three years and to very much outperform the pupils with SEN who left during the same year at stage 3, 4 and 5. What happened in 2008-09 that meant that those children did so well?

Ms Debbie Gladwell (Department of Education):
It is difficult to analyse year on year. One has to look at the trends across all of the years and then put in place the appropriate policies to address that. It is very difficult to home in on particular years, because you have to balance that with the cognitive ability of the children in any particular cohort. It is very difficult to comment specifically on special educational needs, because, after all, when children are on the SEN register, as we said, they have significantly greater needs, even if they are only at stage 1 or 2. It is difficult to comment on only one year, because one has to take cognisance of the cognitive ability of all children in that cohort. It must be reflected on over a longer period.

Mr McDevitt:
That is a big spike; it is like “wow”. If you look at the percentage of school leavers with five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, you will see a spike of 8% when you compare the 2008-09 cohort of leavers with SEN stage 1 and 2 with those from the previous year, and a 13% spike when you compare them with those from two years before. That is a huge jump.

Ms Gladwell:
It is good, given the number of children leaving with —

Mr McDevitt:
It is brilliant. However, I want to know what happened that meant that it worked so well.

Mrs Angus:
It is because there was more focus on outcomes. Schools are putting more effort into helping children with SEN to achieve qualifications and to recognise that they can do so.

Mr McDevitt:
Was there a notable change in codes or training for teachers?

Can you reverse engineer that? Can you say that you did something in the preceding year that explains why we are seeing that?

Ms Gladwell:
SENDO was introduced in 2005. That has built on the inclusive policy that was introduced in 1996, so we continue to have that inclusive policy.

Mr McDevitt:
The other thing that I am curious about, and the Chair picked up on it, is that there is still a considerable increase in young people with statements in post-primary education. That is literally shooting off the scale on the graph that you provided us with. We also see a decrease in the number of young people with statements in primary education, yet the previous data that we were discussing shows that the return on investment, not to put too fine a point on it, is so much greater in primary than in post-primary. Surely that is counter-intuitive? Why would more people be statemented at post-primary level when there is less return on investment, and fewer people statemented at primary level where there is so much more return? You would expect the graph to go in the other direction.

Ms Gladwell:
They will continue through school —

Mr McDevitt:
I understand that; perhaps they will be picked up in Key Stage 1 and that recognition will continue. That is OK and accounts for some of it, but you would not expect a fall-off in primary figures if you are getting so much better results in primary than you are in post-primary. Some of those figures in post-primary are children being picked up at later stages in their career.

Ms Boyd:

One reason for that is that primary schools are getting better at meeting the needs of children with SEN, and therefore they are not statementing in the same way. There is a bubble of children rising and getting into post-primary. As we have heard, literacy skills are not good for about one quarter of boys and about one fifth of girls at the end of Key Stage 2. Once you get into post-primary school, you have a major problem with your education if you cannot read adequately. I think that is what you are seeing there.

Mr McDevitt:

So does this reflect some of the systemic issues around the identification, which is the point that Mrs Murphy was making, about the proper identification of children with SEN and a possibly over-generous application of the term "SEN" in some settings?

Ms Boyd:

In some cases. However, probably the main cause, from what I gather from post-primary principals as well as from the data, is that the Key Stage 2 English results are not good, particularly for boys, so they will have huge difficulties throughout their education in post-primary.

Mr McDevitt:

On a final point, to return to the Chair's basic question, what can you point to in the review that makes you confident at a policy level that, when the new revised system starts, you will have effected the proper level of cultural change, particularly within Key Stages 1 and 2, in order to get teachers and other pedagogues able to identify those — I will not use the phrase "at risk" — but those children who need early intervention?

Ms Boyd:

That sits alongside the review, because teachers have told us that that is a very big problem for them. No matter what pedagogy you use, about 80% of children will learn to read and will not have a difficulty, and 20% will not. Research by Dr Sharon McMurray from Stranmillis College into schools in Belfast showed clearly that the nature of dyslexia has changed now that a phonics approach is being used. Those children who are not reading are the ones who cannot learn effectively through a phonics programme.

The CPD programme that we are introducing in October if we get the business case approval is based on Dr McMurray's expertise and research. It will train teachers to use teacher assessment for early learning skills, and it will identify those who are at risk at P1 and P2 age. It will show teachers how to interpret that data, and how then to select the optimum pedagogy for that child. It will develop the skills of the teacher in using that pedagogy so we will have a joined-up approach in the classroom in early years. The children will be assessed by the teacher in the very early years through an assessment based on observation of what they are doing. It is not a formal test.

Later on, formal teacher tests can be used — for example, dyslexia screening. However, the potential problem in the classroom will be identified and the strategies put in place to meet that need without having to be referred to an educational psychologist, go on a waiting list, and then another waiting list for intervention. It will happen in the classroom.

If it is done through the classroom, you are talking about fewer numbers. You are picking the children up before that difficulty is consolidated. Again, research shows us that once difficulties have gone on for too long, they go into the long-term memory, and then it is incredibly difficult to change them. Therefore, very early intervention is absolutely key and, to get that, you have to train the teachers at the point of delivery of education.

Teachers also tell us that they want that. They do not want to be saying to about 20% of their children, "I am sorry, but I cannot meet your needs." These children are sitting there in the classrooms. If they are not engaged in education, they are tuned out totally or engaged in something less appropriate than education.

Mrs Angus:
One thrust of the review is that all classrooms and teachers are responsible for the SEN children in the classroom and they should recognise that they need support, and get that support in early. The review will address that issue by recognising that special needs is not for special schools or part of a school but for the whole school to address as an integral part of what a school does.

Mr Craig:
I declare an interest as a member of the Assembly all-party group on autism. Dorothy, you made mention, and you may regret mentioning it, of Middletown. I have a couple of questions around that. When Middletown was envisaged, it was all about service delivery for parents, families and, of course, the children suffering from autism. If there has been a fundamental change since then, and it is now delivering educational services or training with regard to autism, why has that occurred when, originally, when Middletown was first mooted, clear assurances were given to the voluntary sector, which was delivering those same training needs at a lot less cost to the public purse, that that would not be the use of Middletown?

Secondly, assurances were given to the House and every Member that an element of Middletown would be funded by the Government in the Republic of Ireland. Has that been fulfilled, have we any idea of the amounts, and are there any assurances that that funding will be continued?

Mrs Angus:
It was always envisaged that one of the four key provisions of Middletown would be a training and advisory service. That has been in the documentation from the beginning, as far as I am aware, and it is one of the things that Middletown is delivering at the moment.

Mr Craig:
Is there any truth that it is the only thing it is delivering?

Ms Gladwell:
No. There is also a research service, and they have produced research documents. Another service has been an interim advice and guidance service whereby the education and library boards, through the five-board autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) group, have been referring the most complex of children's cases to Middletown for particular interventions through a whole-school and multidisciplinary approach.

Although they are small numbers in relation to the number of children, those are the most complex cases of children with autism, with very significant needs. The team there are going into the school, and, at times, the home to link into the services provided through the boards and the school and to provide a 360º service. So a number of services are continuing with the Middletown centre.

In relation to the current work, an annual budget is set, which is agreed by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science. That budget runs at approximately £1·3 million and is met and funded on a 50:50 basis. That funding has been and continues to be there.

Mr Craig:
Are you aware that the Republic is reviewing how it deals with autism? As just about everyone knows, the Republic is under huge budgetary pressures. If that funding were reduced, that would obviously have an impact on the centre. Are you aware that that review is taking place?

Mrs Angus:
The North/South Ministerial Council asked the two Departments to produce a phased multi-annual plan in relation to Middletown. We are aware that, in preparation for that, the South has been carrying out an audit of its autism services, because some time has passed since the centre was first envisaged. That has been done to inform the plan, going forward.

Mr Craig:
I thank Debbie for actually giving us the costs of running Middletown. I find that fascinating. Maybe, Dorothy, you could give us an idea of the number of children every year who receive a service from Middletown.

Mrs Angus:
As Debbie indicated, at the moment, that number is very small, because the building that was planned for Middletown is not there and the full services cannot be phased in and put in place until it is. The building has been planned.

Mr Craig:
Is there any truth in the rumour that the capital cost of that new building will be totally met by the Exchequer in the North, as opposed to the joint approach?

Mrs Angus:
No. This is a North/South project and remains a North/South project.

The Chairperson:
There are serious concerns, Dorothy. It would be right to say that there are many Members from the previous Committee and many in the House who have serious reservations about the value for money from the Middletown centre. If we are looking at capacity-building and having to train teachers and others in schools, I think that there would be a big question as to whether the money that we spend on Middletown would be better spent on that training, which is not the type of training being done at Middletown.

As Debbie said, Middletown envisages dealing with high-level cases and particularly complex cases. However, another research building in Northern Ireland is the last thing that we need. We could fill this Chamber with the research papers and information that we have on that particular problem. Some of us have very serious reservations not about what goes on at the centre but about the amount of money that has been spent. That money could be spent more appropriately.

Mrs Dobson:
I have a couple of questions, the first of which follows on from the Chairman's earlier comments. Irene, you referred to one of the key themes as early identification, assessment and intervention in respect of special educational needs. How do you intend to address that, especially with regard to children entering preschool education?

Mrs I Murphy:
I mentioned a pilot scheme in early years settings that we are implementing at the moment through the education and library boards. That pilot will cover three financial years. The overall project will provide support across the settings — to nursery schools, nursery units and PEAGS-funded preschools — for both children and practitioners so that children can be identified earlier and staff in those settings can better understand what to look for when a child with SEN comes before them. Staff can then be trained to identify and intervene within their own parameters, and the children whose needs are greater will then be referred, within the teams that will be set up, to education and library boards or other support.

Mrs Dobson:
Is that pilot currently in place?

Mrs I Murphy:
No; we have just had business case approval for that. The education and library boards will be rolling it out, hopefully with a start date in September or October. The preparation work is under way.

Mrs Dobson:
I welcome that. I think that that will be very important.

I have one other comment. I note the serious concerns highlighted by this Committee during the previous mandate, as well as the extensive input and serious concerns of the key stakeholders. I am concerned that some of the terminology used is not clearly enough defined. For example, can you define what are seen as "barriers to learning"? Is that specifically in relation to children with special educational needs or is the definition much wider than that?

Mrs I Murphy:
It is not a statutory definition as such; it is a more generic term used for children who have special educational needs, who perhaps have disabilities, or who face other barriers to learning, which could arise from their own family or personal circumstances.

Mrs Dobson:
So it does not specifically refer to special educational needs?

Mrs I Murphy:
The term "barriers to learning" is not specific to special educational needs.

Mrs Dobson:
I just feel that sometimes the terminology is not quite clear.

Mrs Angus:
It is not a statutory term, like “special educational needs”, which is laid down in statute. It is a term that we use to cover all the areas in which children may perhaps need support for their learning. It is just a broad term. It could cover newcomer children who have English as another language, or Traveller children who have other factors in their lives because they are transient. Where we need to put in support, we use that generic term.

Mr McNarry:
What are the consequences that will impact on the ability to deliver your key policy issues over the next four years due to financial curtailments?

Mrs Angus:
At the moment, there have been no financial curtailments on the programme that we have been delivering. The budget for the capacity-building programme is slightly smaller than was originally envisaged, but we have been able to put in place what we have been doing with the budget that we have. In that sense, and overall, there has been no cutback in provision for special educational needs.

Mr McNarry:
That is very welcome and good news. In other words, you are saying that you are going to be able to live within the budget that you have been told you have.

Mrs Angus:
Yes; we can deliver within the budget that we have for the programme that we have been describing to you this morning.

Mr McNarry:
Gillian, you spoke of a business case for a project in which you would be looking to incorporate specialist expertise in identifying needs, etc, and something that may, or hopefully would, assist in a need to intervene as soon as possible at six years of age. I take it that business case has been costed?

Ms Boyd:
Yes it has.

Mr McNarry:
How much is it?

Ms Boyd:
Altogether it will be just under £4 million, I think, over four years.

Mr McNarry:
And is that in your budget?

Ms Boyd:
Yes, that is in our budget. The business case is normal; we have to do a business case for everything that we spend money on.

Mr McNarry:
That is super news. If there is any change in that, I would value it if you let the Committee know.

Ms Boyd:
Certainly. The programme will be online so that every teacher will be able to access it. There will be face-to-face training for at least one teacher in every school and a summer school for up to three teachers from each school over four summers.

Mr McNarry:
Just to be absolutely clear — I am always a bit nervous about money — am I right in believing that you are saying that your budget has been discussed, that you understand very clearly that it will be minimally affected, that you can live with it, and that, although I am not saying that you are immune from the discussion that is going on internally in the Department relating to the £300 million shortfall in the budget, you do not expect to be caught up in it?

Mrs Angus:
The budget that has been set for the programme that we are talking about has already taken into account the savings generally in the Department. Of course, it is the Minister's decision year on year to make whatever money available for whatever programmes, but, as we understand it, that is the budget that is set for the moment.

Mr McNarry:
Now you are making me nervous. I understand that you, like everyone else, have to work within a budget that has already been agreed for the next four years. Therefore, I would rather that you did not say "year on year". I expect the Minister to work within a budget that the Assembly Members have agreed to. It is not a budget that I agreed to, but, nevertheless, the Assembly agreed to it.

Mrs Angus:
It is within the budget of the Department, of course, and you will have already seen the savings and where they were intended to be made. The money that was originally allocated for the capacity-building programme was a little higher than it is at the moment, but that has not made a material change to what we are doing in respect of the slight slippage in getting here. Therefore, it is set down over a four-year period. All I am saying is that I would never like to presume for my Minister in respect of money, but the money has been set down over that four-year period.

Mr McNarry:
Let us stick with the good bit of that news, and let us not venture into any ifs, buts or maybes. I will take your word for it.

Mrs Angus:
That we are working towards that budget; yes.

Mr McNarry:
I am taking your word for it that you have the money to deliver what you have just told us. That is good enough for me. Let us not put any silly ideas into somebody else's head.

Ms Boyle:
Thank you for your presentation. Jo-Anne has asked my question, but I would like to talk about statementing, which you mentioned earlier. It is a big issue in every area, and I am sure that parents and guardians have contacted every MLA here about statementing. In my opinion, the process is not working because of the severe delays, which is frustrating for teachers as well. I believe that there needs to be more transparency and accountability, and there needs to be more clarity around the methods by which the SEN decisions are made, so that there are successful outcomes.

I received an e-mail from a parent yesterday, and I will not name names so that the identity can be kept confidential, but I will go over some of the words that she used. Her five-year-old child was recently assessed for autism and Asperger's, and it took a long time to get the assessment. She said:

> "It was absolutely emotionally gruelling. I found the entire process disrespectful and disempowering. We were neither listened to nor heard. I remain totally convinced, and nobody will tell me any different, that this decision is a reflection of a wider agenda."

She also mentioned funding, costs and resources. That parent waited long enough to get her child statemented, and she is only one of a number of parents in a similar position right across the region. I told that parent that I would inform the Committee of her experience.

Mrs Angus:
You said that statementing is not working. One of the motivations for looking at statementing in the review is that we are aware that it is a very bureaucratic process. It is a fairly inflexible process, and, as we have said, a big motivation behind the review was to get the interventions to the children as early as we can and to try to find some way to do that without necessarily having —

Ms Boyle:
When you say "early", what age are you talking about?

Mrs Angus:
It does not have to be age-related. "Early" means when the child needs help: recognising as early as possible that a child needs help and getting those interventions in. I know that we are not speaking about speech and language, but if you get intervention early enough in that area, sometimes a child does not need support later. Therefore, it is "early" in that sense.

That is why we were looking at statementing. We are aware that it is not the easiest process for parents. Debbie might be able to speak about what the parent has reported to you.

Ms Gladwell:
First of all, I would be happy to investigate that further. If you want to refer that to the Minister, we would be happy to go to the boards. Although we do not have an operational position or role in legislative authority to intervene, we would be happy to challenge any board with any parent's concern. I would be happy either to deal with that through ministerial correspondence or if someone wanted to phone us directly. I understand that parents are in a difficult situation and are

dealing with a lot, as well as ensuring that they get the best possible education for their children.

I will move away from the personal case to talk about delays in statutory assessment. Dorothy has already said that we recognise that there is inflexibility there. That inflexibility is set in legislation and the special education regulations. Education and library boards have 18 weeks from the point at which they decide to statement in which to issue that draft statement. The Department can make sure that the boards comply with the legislation and the regulations under governance arrangements. We need to ensure that the boards are very aware of their duties and that they comply with those duties. We have all of those governance arrangements in place. Boards report to us that they comply with the regulations and the legislation around statutory assessment and getting a statement, and we check that through the governance arrangements.

This particular parent has obviously had a harrowing time, and I want to know about that, particularly in relation to the autism strategy and how parents cope with that. However, we want to be able to look at, tying it back through the things now happening to the capacity-building programme and to the early intervention projects. We need to know about these parents because we need to know what the effective model is. Irene was looking at why we need the capacity-building programme, and this is a particular example of why we need it: so that the teachers are fully skilled up to enable that particular intervention to be put in place.

It does not need a label and it does not need a diagnosis always, but a child with autism could present with a range of multiple complex issues, some of which could be addressed without getting a statement or waiting to get the statement. That is the important thing, but we would be more than happy to take receipt of that correspondence and investigate it.

Ms Boyle:
Thank you, Debbie.

The Chairperson:
That would be very much appreciated. Thank you.

Miss M McIlveen:
Thank you for your presentation. I just wanted to pick up on a point that Gillian raised about sensory processing disorder. You said that there are 7,000 children with autism in schools and that most of them have SPD. I was approached by a parent whose child has SPD and is not on the autistic spectrum. What training do you have in place for teachers trying to deal with this particular condition and what support is available to parents whose children are not autistic but have SPD?

Ms Boyd:
That is why we included the training under the heading of SPD rather than autism because, as you say, many children have that problem. Many children have an unrecognised problem because it is not a physical disability.

The training programme is based on the work of a classroom teacher who did a case analysis research-based study in her school. She worked with children in her school who had been identified as having a sensory processing difficulty. She documented very carefully the strategies that she had put in place, developed further strategies, including the use of small equipment, and then evaluated the whole programme very formally after a year. She then submitted the documentation for her master's degree in education for which she apparently got a very high mark. It is based on her individual research within the classroom with a number of children with different conditions including sensory processing difficulty, autism or ADHD, but the interesting thing was that the strategies she put into place were beneficial for all those children.

The programme is based on the strategies that she developed and the small pieces of equipment that anybody can use in a mainstream classroom. The materials will go online and there will be face-to-face tutorials for up to 60 teachers starting in October.

Miss M McIlveen:
Has it started yet?

Ms Boyd:
No; it will start in October, as long as we get approval for it. The materials will always be there after that, and they will be able to be picked up by any teacher. We can also have them put online for any parent. We expect the schools involved in the training to work very closely with parents, because a child spends a minority of their time in school. If any of the strategies need to be used in the home, the parents need to know about them in detail. Part of the training will be that teachers must work with parents, share what they are doing, how effective it is and get their experiences on board too.

Miss M McIlveen:
Will that be rolled out through the boards or will it be done centrally?

Ms Boyd:
Centrally. It will not be board dependent. The teacher who has developed it will be the leader.

The Chairperson:
It might be useful if we had a brief paper setting that out.

Miss M McIlveen:
That would be really useful for parents who have been in contact with me.

The Chairperson:
No doubt it will be raised by others as well. Would it be possible to provide us with that?

Ms Boyd:
I have the written introduction to the business case, so I can send that to you this afternoon.

Miss M McIlveen:
That is helpful. I raised questions with the Health Minister as well in relation to this matter, so it would be quite interesting to see what you bring forward. Thank you very much for that.

The Chairperson:
OK. Thank you very much, Dorothy, Irene, Gillian and Debbie. No doubt we will see you again.