



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Improving Pupil Attendance:
NIAO Follow-up Report

12 March 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Michaela Boyle (Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Ross Hussey
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Seán Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Mike Brennan	Acting Treasury Officer of Accounts
Dr Clare Mangan	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mr Kieran Donnelly	Comptroller and Auditor General
Mrs Caroline Gillan	Department of Education
Mr Paul Sweeney	Department of Education
Ms Alex Barr	Southern Education and Library Board

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Paul Sweeney, the accounting officer for the Department of Education, who is here with his team. You are very welcome, Paul. Please introduce your team.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Department of Education): Good afternoon, Chair and members. I introduce Caroline Gillan, director of inclusion, access and well-being, and assistant secretary in the Department of Education; Dr Clare Mangan, chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board; and Alex Barr, chief education welfare officer for both the Southern Education and Library Board and the Western Education and Library Board.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Paul. Members, you will find the biographies of all our witnesses on pages 12 to 16 of your packs.

Mr Mike Brennan is also here, acting on behalf of Fiona Hamill, along with Kieran Donnelly. I point out that we usually hold our meetings in the Senate Chamber, but we are in room 29 due to other Committee commitments in the Building. Therefore, we do not have the usual layout, with the Comptroller and Auditor General and Fiona Hamilton or Mike Brennan on either side of us. Members, if there is anything that you want clarified by the auditor, you will have that opportunity after the evidence session.

Members, before we proceed further, I draw your attention to correspondence that we have just received from the Department of Education, which states that there are two errors in the Audit Office report on improving pupil attendance. They are not Audit Office errors; they came from the Department. The first relates to the number of cases referred to the Education Welfare Service (EWS) that resulted in a fine to parents. The report states that there were 108 such cases in paragraph 17 on page 7, and in paragraph 3.30 on page 40. The second error refers to the number of education supervision orders, which is stated in the report as 24. That information can also be found in paragraph 17 on page 7 of the report, and paragraph 3.30 on page 40.

Mr Sweeney's correspondence provides corrected figures for those two points. A copy of that correspondence has been provided to members only now because it was received just this afternoon. Members may wish to take time to look at that.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, could you give us the two page numbers again?

The Chairperson: Yes. They are paragraph 17 on page 7, and paragraph 3.30 on page 40.

Mr McQuillan: What is the actual number of cases that resulted in fines or an education supervision order?

The Chairperson: The numbers are 36 and 47, across the boards. Mr Sweeney, can you explain how those figures have been reached? They could have been brought to the attention of the Committee sooner, bearing in mind that the report has been out for some time. The report was signed off by your Department before it was published. Will you comment on that?

Mr Sweeney: First, I owe the Committee an unreserved apology. As you can imagine, we prepared for today's evidence session and, in doing so, I wanted to interrogate the figures, particularly around the number of fines. In doing so, we were not able to substantiate those figures. Therefore, I invited, through Clare, each of the boards to interrogate those figures. I received the new figures this morning and got them to the Committee as soon as I possibly could, which was before 1.00 pm today.

The Chairperson: Part of the reason why we have you here today is to discuss the keeping of correct data on the system. Some members might want to comment on that.

Mr Dallat: Given that we will be focusing, by and large, on statistics, it is certainly disappointing to find at the very last moment that the Department's own figures are incorrect. Not only that, but we are finding out only as we start our session that we need to make corrections. That certainly does not instil confidence in me that any statistics from the Department are reliable.

Mr McQuillan: I concur with John. It starts us off on the wrong foot. We may have to double-check things before we come to a conclusion.

The Chairperson: Thank you, members. I concur with what you have said. It is disappointing that figures have had to be corrected at this late stage, when we are about to take evidence. I reiterate that part of the inquiry will focus on data systems and the mechanisms for keeping correct data. Thank you for that, Mr Sweeney. We will move on.

I will start my line of questioning on the Department's progress in implementing the recommendations of the 2004 report. In my opinion and that of the Committee, that progress appears to have been, at best, very slow. Some of the recommendations in the 2004 report have not been implemented at all. Although there has been a marginal improvement in overall pupil attendance, there has also been an increase in unauthorised absence. Mr Sweeney, can you explain why, in 10 years, the Department has not developed an attendance strategy, despite that being a key recommendation in the previous Audit Office report? What is the Department doing about that?

Mr Sweeney: Chair, thank you. I very much welcome the report. It wholly aligns with the Department's priorities of raising standards and tackling educational underachievement. Obviously, at the core of the report is the recognition that attendance and educational achievement are inextricably linked.

I accept that the Department has not published a strategy for tackling attendance but, in responding to those issues, we have operated within a strategic framework. As you said, there has been a marginal

increase in the figures overall, but, disappointingly, the area of unauthorised absence remains very challenging. During this session, I hope that we will be able to provide evidence to the Committee of the steps that we have taken over a number of years to respond in a strategic way.

Importantly, the report is very timely and has created a new impetus in the Department. If I were to be self-critical, although we have focused relentlessly on raising attainment — attainment and attendance are inextricably linked — I feel that we have not been explicit, focused and targeted enough on the issue of attendance. The publication of the report gives us a new impetus and focus whereby the Department and the boards, in partnership with schools, parents and communities, can work forward in a more joined-up way. The first stage will be more proactive engagement with schools, particularly those in the most disadvantaged areas, and that will lead to a marshalling of all the best-practice guidance that we have in the publication of an agreed strategy.

The Chairperson: OK. Basically, what you are saying, Mr Sweeney, is that it is a work in progress. Is there a timeline for that agreed strategy?

Mr Sweeney: The timeline is somewhere between 12 and 18 months. I would like to explain my reasoning for that. One of the key recommendations in the report is to more intensely engage with schools, particularly those in the most disadvantaged areas and, arguably, post-primary schools, and to work with them to identify and disseminate best practice.

It is really important that targets are not top-down; that was drawn out in the 2004 report. Targets need to be grown from the bottom up, and we must work with schools to realistically assess what challenging and realistic targets could be set by schools and boards and by the Department on an overall and regional basis.

We have identified the schools that we want to engage with in the first instance. We will have one substantive round of discussions with those schools before the summer and re-engage with them in the autumn. The formulation of the strategy will really depend on what additional steps are required, over and above the good work that we are involved in. If, for example, it was the will of the Assembly that we take some particularly radical steps that might require legislation, that will determine whether there will have to be a period of consultation on a draft strategy. We will put urgency into that work. However, to make sure that it is substantive document, it will require somewhere between 12 and 18 months.

The Chairperson: I am sure that other members will want to come in on this, but that brings me on to the Committee's visit to Millburn Primary School last week in preparation for this session. We saw at first hand how one school was able to tackle non-attendance in extremely difficult circumstances. The Committee was extremely impressed with the efforts of the school and how everyone engaged with the local community. Obviously, early intervention has been highlighted as good practice, and it was key in that school. Given that the report highlights that absence levels increase as pupils progress through post-primary, surely more needs to be done to tackle the problem early on. I would imagine that early intervention will be part of the strategy.

Mr Sweeney: Yes. The Department has an overall focus on raising standards and tackling the cycle of disadvantage, poor attendance and poor outcomes. Members will be aware of the investment that the Department has made in early years, from Sure Start through to preschool, nursery school and primary school. We see the importance of tracking poor attendance even in the preschool period and certainly in primary school. That can be symptomatic of more serious underlying causes. It really is important that all the partners who are involved, from social services to educationalists, teachers, leaders in schools, parents and boards of governors, share that intelligence so that there is early identification and early steps can be taken to be more preventative.

The Chairperson: I understand the due process and what has to be done as far as intervention is concerned. However, during our visit to Millburn Primary School, we saw the school working with parents and the community on a first-hand basis. It is important to keep within regulations and everything else, but you have to allow the schools to take a common-sense approach to dealing with an issue when it arises. At times, that may mean that a school has to work slightly outside of the norm. That is key to a successful outcome and tackling the societal problems that are faced by families, schools and the whole school community. We saw that at first hand in Millburn Primary School, and it works. I would like to hear more about that later on. I will bring in other members.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, you quite rightly identified Millburn Primary School as exemplar material. Perhaps you will also recall that we visited another institution last year. It is called Magilligan jail. There, we saw the finest examples of education, and attendance was certainly compulsory.

Given that nothing dramatic has happened since 2004, are you conscious that, every year, 4,000 young people here leave school unable to read or write? Are you conscious that 80% of those who end up in jail did not attend school as children and that some left unable to even write their own names? However, they discovered in jail that they were quite intelligent, bright people, and some of them even went on to write books and so on.

Mr Sweeney, is it good enough to come here 10 years on from the last time I sat on an Audit Office report on this subject and tell us that, in 18 months, you are going to change things, when Millburn has already done it? That school is in Ballysally, a place that was wrongly portrayed in the media as 'The Estate', and it has done fantastic work. Are you sitting on your hands or do you know about the schools in the most socially deprived areas that are getting it right?

Mr Sweeney: It was exactly this time last year that we took part in the evidence session on literacy and numeracy. Some of the points that Mr Dallat has raised were at the very heart of that discussion. So, am I aware of the impact of non-attendance and poor educational outcomes? Yes.

At this stage of the evidence session, I do not want to list a whole range of initiatives that we have taken. However, I will cite one very significant policy shift in the Department. In 2009, we published 'Every School a Good School'. At the very heart of that document was the notion of autonomy in schools and creating an environment in which the Department told school leaders, such as Mr Platt at Millburn Primary School, that it believes in school leadership. We delegate authority to schools and give as much support as we possibly can to them. The people who are best placed to tackle issues such as underachievement and poor attendance in the first instance are the school leaders. The Department's focus has been on getting behind high-quality school leadership that is pupil-centric and community-orientated and has a good board of governors. When all that comes together, terrific things can happen. However, sadly, it does not happen consistently.

Mr Clarke: Millburn Primary School has been cited twice as an exemplar. I am not trying to create friction but I would rather that we, as a Committee, had an opportunity to discuss some of the things that we heard last week, rather than saying that everything is perfect. On the surface, the presentation was excellent, but we have not had time to drill into some of that. I may have one view on some of it and the reports may say something different. Chair, I am not trying to take away from what you or John said about Millburn, but I do not know that everything is entirely as it was portrayed last week. I am a wee bit sceptical about some of it. As a Committee, we need time to discuss that before we come to a conclusion about whether we support everything.

Mr Sweeney mentioned Every School a Good School. That was a great catchphrase. I am straying slightly from the report, and I know you will soon pull me into line, Chairperson. That was a strapline, but there are schools that are good schools and the Department is destroying them. I want you to bear that in mind. I know that we are talking about attendance, but that was merely a strapline and a headline-grabber. We have schools in all our constituencies that are good schools but are not getting the support from the education service. I will bring that back to what we are supposed to be talking about today. Why are the schools not working with your service to identify problems, and why is the education welfare team not working with the schools to try to identify the problems? It strikes me that the two things are disjointed and, the sooner they are fixed, the sooner we will identify the problems.

An interesting statistic is that unauthorised absence has grown from 27% to 33%. I do not know, Mr Sweeney, that we can wait 18 months. The statistics in the report go back to 2011. If we wait another 18 months, it will have a detrimental effect on young people in education today.

John's point was well made. One thing that the Committee is united on was the visit to Magilligan prison and the outcomes from that prison. However, the statistics that John Dallat talked about are sad. I would like to think that the majority of our children are going to our schools to get educated, not to come out the other end to go to prison to get educated.

Mr Girvan: What is the permanent secretary's role in this? I appreciate that that is your position, Paul. We are dealing with spend. What if any other Department was wasting £22 million? The report states that it was a loss. Funding is received for pupils who are supposed to be in school, but, because of a

lack of follow-up, they are not. We have an unauthorised absence rate of exactly double that in primary and secondary schools in England. They are not all dealing with areas of worse deprivation.

In the Department, policy may be being made and not always implemented. We are all great at producing plans and programmes to deal with issues. What measures are being taken to ensure that we have consistency between one school that has good practice and a neighbouring school that is not working? You mentioned leaders in schools — I prefer to call them principals — who are probably there because it is a job as opposed to a profession. There are some people in education who should not be. For them, it is a job and nothing else. They are not in it because they love to work with and teach young people. I am not putting everybody into that category because there are some wonderful examples of those who go the second mile and, because they understand children and young people, they can get them to go the second mile. What mechanisms are in place to ensure that those sorts of people are attracted into education, opposed to those who just want to get a salary?

Mr Sweeney: Chair, shall I come back on that at this stage, or would you prefer to go round the members?

Mr Girvan: I might want to come back on that.

The Chairperson: Quite a few members want to ask questions.

Mr McQuillan: Mine is a very simple question. It was asked by John, and again by Trevor. It has been 10 years since the previous PAC report. We have heard that there is now a matter of urgency after looking at this one; you are going to have it turned around in 18 months. What have you been doing for the past 10 years? Why is there so much urgency only now?

Mr Rogers: I agree on that point. There seems to be a big disconnect between policy and reality. Paul talked about school leadership. You said in 2009 that you were getting behind the whole area of school leadership. When you look at the last year's Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) annual report, where was the major weakness? It was in school leadership. You do not just fix school leadership through a professional qualification for headship (PQH) or something like that. It is a much more complex process than that. Why are we so far behind in developing school leadership? As Paul said, every good teacher does not make a good leader.

Mr McKay: The report is on pupil attendance, but we find that we end up discussing a wider array of educational matters, as we did in the Adjournment debate yesterday evening. I was going to make a similar point to Seán's about leadership. Leadership is absolutely crucial. I have been to many schools where the principal has changed; the new principal brings a breath of fresh air and the whole school changes. That shows what can be done. What focus is the Department and the boards putting on leadership training and ensuring that principals are held to account on delivery?

A lot of this comes down to putting your resources where the need is. Obviously, there is a clear correlation between those from low socio-economic backgrounds and attendance figures. I always compare the figures in Ballymena town with the wards that people are reared in and what school they go to in the town. The same applies to school attendance. It is quite clear what a lot of the problems are. Schools can get to a certain point in what they can do, but there is an onus on the community and on the parents. A lot of the good case studies that we see concern schools where the principals and teachers are pulling the parents into the school, because a lot of parents still leave their children off at the school gate and leave the job to the teachers. We need a more holistic approach. I do not know what type of strategy is in place to ensure that parents are more involved with the school. How do we build relationships between parents and teachers, other than going to the occasional parent-teacher association (PTA) meeting?

Mr Copeland: I have two small points, one of which may be anecdotal. I remember many years ago, in my innocence, asking the chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library board — not the current one; the previous one — what his primary legal responsibility was. I fully expected a reply that it was to ensure that school buildings were clean and properly built, that teachers taught properly and that children got an education. He told me that his primary legal responsibility was to live within budget. That set an alarm bell ringing.

The issue that I have with some of this stuff is that we have children who are not attending school. That can be because they are choosing not to go, because someone is not giving them a reason for going, or it can be that those who are legally charged with sending them to school and taking them to

school are not doing it. Those are three very separate issues. Are there any indications or graphs that show correlations between levels of non-attendance, which, most probably, according to the report, are highest among families on a low income and the teachers in those schools? In other words, is there a malaise that affects not only the pupil or student body, if that is the right term, but the teaching body? The difficulties that many of those kids take into the school are rooted in the home. In my view, the school has an even more difficult task with those children. On the back of that, I have to say that, in a certain disused school in east Belfast — I think that it had 68 pupils when it closed — there is now a very enthusiastic gentleman who attracts almost 150 kids, six nights a week, to learn. They do not know that they are learning; it is done through a slightly different process.

"Unauthorised" is not a term that I like for a non-attending pupil. There are only two types of behaviour: acceptable and unacceptable. The word "unauthorised" maybe gives the wrong connotation. Are we sure that, in examining the causes rather than gathering the statistics — gathering the statistics ain't no good; we have to understand what the causes are and then address them — we are aware of the sickness levels among staff in schools where the sickness level among pupils, which seems to be the biggest single contributor, is highest?

Mr Hussey: I have to say that, from the start of this, I have not been impressed with what I have heard. As Adrian pointed out, 2004 was quite a while ago; 10 years ago. We seem to have gone no further from 2004. We talked about parents, teachers, governors and the boards. Not once did we mention pupils. Not once did we mention perhaps talking to pupils.

My father died when I was 13. When I was 13, I was not interested in going to school. I went — if I did not go, my mother would have skinned me alive — but I did not learn because I did not participate. Looking back now, I can see exactly why I did not participate: I was not interested. I was a 13-year-old boy. I had lost my father, and nobody asked me. I left school with three O levels to my name. I know why that was. I did not really start to work at school until I went to the technical college. In fact, I did not really start to work in education until I was 44 and did my degree. I know what it is like.

Pupil attendance is a major issue. We have to look at how education is delivered. We have to look at various schools and at some of the buildings. I declare an interest as a governor of Omagh High School. The school is falling down around them, yet it got one of the best reports from the Department of Education that any school has had. Why? Because the staff are good and are prepared to teach, and the children are learning. It is as simple as that: they are learning.

The other point, as was made by Daithí, is around whether it is a town or rural issue. All that must be taken into account. We also have an issue here relating to Travellers. That is a separate issue, but it is quite clear that, if they are Travellers, that is what they do; the family will travel and, therefore, they will move on. Yet nobody seems to have taken that on board or asked this: why do we not find out where they are going and sort that out as well? There are a lot of issue there and, I am sure, a lot of issues around rural versus urban. Spuds have to be picked. What is more important, lifting the spuds or going to school? That goes right back 30, 40 or 50 years. That was always the way.

As I said, I am very disappointed with all that we have heard. The figures were wrong at the start, so you got your homework wrong before you started. If you did that at school, you would have been kept back. We are told that we have to wait 12 months to 18 months. I agree totally with Trevor; 12 months to 18 months is nonsense. This has to be worked on now to be moved forward. We have already wasted 10 years.

The Chairperson: Thank you, members. Before I allow Mr Sweeney in, I want to remind members that, although there will be a difference of opinion around school policy, the focus today is solely on pupil attendance. We do not want to stray into any other area.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, maybe before Mr Sweeney comes back on those questions, I think that, on the issue of leadership, raised by Seán and followed up by others, it would be very valuable to hear what in the strategy will bring forward a different type of teacher in a leadership role and what kind of testing will be in place to ensure that the person is not applying just for a job but wants to enter a vocation and has the kind of commitment that we saw in Millburn. We know fine well that it was in Magilligan jail, and it is in other schools as well.

That kind of leadership does not require somebody to sit all day tracking roll books. In fact, the children told us that they do not want to miss school. They would not want to miss it. Where is that? I know, traditionally, what happened in the past. Teachers were glad when disruptive pupils stayed at

home because they thought that they got on with the ones who wanted to learn, but that is how we filled our jails and that is how we left people with no skills and unemployed. That is how we created the divided society that we live in, so obviously the strategy that you are going to tell us about now should encompass those concerns that have been expressed by other members as well as me.

Mr Sweeney: Chair, shall I respond now to some of those points?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: Obviously, there is a range of issues there. If you just take school leadership alone, you could spend a whole session on that, so I will try to cover as many areas as I possibly can. Rather than dominate the evidence session, I will speak about the role of the Education Welfare Service and the role of the education and library boards, and, if members want to delve into some of the specific detail around some of our policy areas, Caroline will be happy to help there.

The Chairperson: Absolutely, and that will happen after you respond.

Mr Sweeney: The idea of the Department of Education destroying schools is something that I do not recognise, nor that it does not sufficiently support schools. However, if there is evidence of that, please tell me, and I will be more than happy to deal with it.

Remarks were made about people approaching their professional task in education as just another job. Over the decades, I have worked in a number of Departments in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and I can say that the professionalism and the passion that I experience in the Department of Education towards education has been most impressive. I want to put on the record that it is not just another job.

Mr Girvan: That might well be on many occasions, but it just takes one or two bad apples to destroy a whole thing. One bad leader can destroy a whole school.

Mr Sweeney: I am going to come to leadership, but I thought that I needed to make that specific remark about the remarks that were made about the Department of Education and the officials who work there. I know that that professionalism and passion is exhibited across the education and library boards as well.

When I get the opportunity to outline what we have been doing over the past 10 years, because I think that the members have wrongly got the impression that we have been sitting on our hands, I want to be given the opportunity to debunk that idea. However, it is important to dwell, first, on the remark about 'Every School a Good School' being a strapline. The reality is that we spent nearly two years talking to all the key people in education before we formulated that strategy. We consulted on it, and it has subsequently been recognised as being a really sound document. It was initiated in 2009, but, from my point of view, it is time now to look at it again. We should never sit on our hands and assume, as one of the members said, that things will self-implement, so there is an opportunity to revisit Every School a Good School. However, it has been a game-changer, I believe, in giving primacy to the leaders — the principals — in the schools.

As for the remarks about the unauthorised absence, yes, this is a very serious issue. On the face of it, it would appear that we have twice the rate of unauthorised absence than would be the case in England. There are a number of reasons for that and, if members want to delve into that, Caroline will do so in some detail.

Before I outline what we have been doing for the past 10 years, I will talk about school leadership, because I think that it is a common theme coming through. Such is the importance that the Minister attaches to issues such as school leadership and attainment that he recently tasked me to meet the 30 area learning communities across the region. Between the end of September and early January, I had the privilege of meeting all the post-primary principals in clusters of 30 groups, and it is remarkable how much that common theme about leadership was coming through. All of them consistently told me that, in their professional experience, there has never been a more challenging time to be a school principal or leader than now. Some of the evidence that is emerging, particularly in the post-primary sector, shows that the number of applicants for posts is worryingly low.

When I specifically asked the profession what more the Department needs to do to support leadership, they told me that newly qualified principals in particular feel wholly unsupported and on their own.

They need more mentoring support from people who are in post or who have just recently retired. There were mixed views about the PQH — one of the members mentioned that — and about the masters programme.

The most insightful experience that I had came when the leaders said that we should empower them to develop leadership in their profession. We have some excellent examples. There is an issue of scale and, if a school is large enough, it can become a learning community in itself and generate leadership. There was tremendous insight as a result of that experience, and the Department is giving serious thought to what additional steps it needs to take. There is no doubt about it: if there is one thing that can bring about change and a real turnaround in a school it is the right level of leadership. We need to ensure that we get that.

I want to flag up a number of areas to address the point that we have done nothing over the past 10 years, but I do not want to give the impression that we are just ticking boxes. First, there was the issue around data. From 2007-08, the Department has produced an annual census of all schools, which details, on a school-by-school and a constituency basis, the overall rate of absence. So, every Member can drop into their constituency, draw out any school and see its rate of overall absence. That is published by the Department and is professionally pulled together by NISRA.

There were also other elements to tackling absence. We issued a number of circulars over the past number of years that have helped to perfect our data collection, and I believe that we are in a very strong place as far as data collection is concerned. We also commissioned a major piece of research by RSM McClure Watters to look at tackling absence, particularly in schools that are under stress. As a result of that, we were able to publish guidance in June last year that set out good practice and required schools to develop a strategy for tackling absence. Further to that, since 2010, every school has been required to produce an annual school development plan. Those plans roll forward for three years and are submitted, in the first instance, to the education and library boards. From 2010, we have required schools to factor a strategy for tackling absence into their school development plans.

I will move on. The curriculum has been a very important focus in all of this. Sadly, in the past, and particularly for some pupils who were coming towards the end of their career, the curriculum was not perceived to be as relevant as it might be. However, in 2007, we revised the curriculum and, since then, have put a great deal more focus on vocational training and a much more pronounced role for further education. So, if you like, there are now more reasons to stay at school.

I will recap. We have taken a number of steps. We have focused on a number of very specific groups — again, we can go into detail — such as newcomers, looked-after children and school-age mothers, and some good results have been achieved. For example, the attendance of Travellers has gone up by 6% in primary school and 5% in post-primary school, and we have had a 2% increase in the attendance of looked-after children. I believe that we are collaborating with all the key agencies, organisations and Departments, and that we have all the component parts to approach the issue in a strategic manner. What we now need to do is give it more impetus, be more explicit about attendance and marshal it into a strategy that will hopefully identify the additional steps that we now need to take to make sure that we start to get the figures down.

The Chairperson: On that point, Mr Sweeney, do you agree that it is disjointed between the Department and the ELBs around all that?

Mr Sweeney: Do you mean around managing attendance?

The Chairperson: Yes, and the data system around it. Is that what I am hearing?

Mr Sweeney: I think Clare is keen to —

Dr Clare Mangan (Belfast Education & Library Board): Different data systems are utilised. Mr Sweeney referred to the Northern Ireland statistics that are produced on school attendance across the Province. Those are available to schools, and the education and library boards give consideration to them. There is also the school-based data on attendance that is collected by individual schools through a module that is part of the C2k framework. Separate from that, there are the information management systems in the education and library boards that relate specifically to the referrals that are made to the Education Welfare Service. So, different data sets are available to assist with the collection of different types of information about aspects of overall school attendance and, more specifically, those parts of the school population for which more difficulties have been identified.

Mr McQuillan: Mr Sweeney, you told us about what you have done for the past 10 years, but the furthest that you went back was 2007. So, you did nothing for three years after the report was published.

You did not mention doing any work with parents who may have had a bad experience at school and do not see it as an important part of their life. That is passed to the next generation and maybe even the next generation. Have you done any work on that side of things?

Mr Sweeney: I think that the report came out in November 2004. In 2005, we took the earliest opportunity to be explicit about attendance in our regulations for school development plans.

One of the most important initiatives that we undertook was setting up the extended-schools programme in 2006. That is targeted at those schools in the most disadvantaged areas, and about 500 schools receive about £12.5 million. Importantly, central to that programme is the involvement of parents and the community, and nearly 40% of those schools have breakfast clubs. That allows us to get the holistic approach that someone mentioned earlier and involve the community and parents in things like breakfast clubs or homework clubs after school. When you went to Millburn Primary School, you saw examples of that and, if not once a term, at least once a year, Mr Platt involves grandparents and parents in a bespoke breakfast club.

The extended-schools programme that was introduced in 2006 and developed since has been an important method by which we have reached out to the community and to the parents. More recently, we asked schools to come together in clusters where they have good practice in tackling disadvantage and attendance and, in particular, in involving parents. We did not sit on our hands but have taken a range of opportunities to intervene.

The term "strapline" has been used this afternoon, and our strapline has been more about achievement, but, of course, inextricably linked to achievement is attendance. Even the best teacher in the world cannot achieve for a pupil if there is irregular or persistently poor attendance.

If we have given the impression that we have not done enough, I think that the fault has been the relentless focus on achievement. However, we also need to be more explicit about targeting attendance and its criticality. We need to be more to the fore with that and more pronounced in stressing its criticality.

The Chairperson: Absolutely. If you do not have attendance, you do not get achievement.

Mrs Caroline Gillan (Department of Education): I want to add to that. In addition to the extended-schools programme and its engagement with parents to combat the negative cycle that you referred to, there is the Sure Start programme that focuses on preschool children. That is very much about engaging with children and their families in areas such as lifestyle, health and education. A lot of that is about breaking the negative cycle and encouraging good behaviours and positive lifestyles early on. That is complementary to the later extended schools.

The other thing is the more recent Education Works campaign. The Minister kicked that off, I believe, in 2011, and that was in recognition of the need to speak to parents and emphasise the value of education and encourage parents to get involved in children's education. In the first two tranches, that focused on younger children. As we move forward, we will focus on older children towards GCSE age, because there is also a trend by which attendance tends to fall off after years 8 and 9.

Mr McQuillan: The Sure Start programme is working, and John and I saw an example of that in our constituency in Harpur's Hill one Friday, but there was a problem with the funding. They were never sure what funding they were getting from one year to the next. If Sure Start is to work, more of a foundation needs to be put in place so that they know from year to year that they will have that funding, that it is available and when it is available. However, it is working in the community.

Mrs Gillan: It is valuable work.

The Chairperson: A number of members want to come in with supplementary questions. I ask them to keep them brief.

Mr Clarke: Mr Sweeney, the sooner we get down to questions and get you off your script, the better, because you have said in terms of the 2004 report. We are now in 2014, and you are citing all the

wonderful examples. It is lost in the detail of what you are trying to say because it sounds as if you are working from a script. If what you have done since 2007 is so good, why is it still failing? You did not answer my question about the unauthorised absences. Between 2007 and 2011, they increased by 5%. When will you realise that whatever you implemented in 2007 did not work? When will you implement something that does work and not wait 10 years to come back to it?

The Chairperson: When you left the room, he touched on unauthorised absences.

Mr Clarke: Sorry. I apologise for that.

Mr McKay: When you were on your own unauthorised absence. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Sweeney: I did not get the first sentence of your question.

Mr Clarke: Which bit? The bit about you being on your script or when we have got you off your script?

Mr Sweeney: The script was about the middle. I did not get the first bit, but I will attempt to respond to your points.

Mr Clarke: You are trying to put yourself on a pedestal, through your script, because of what you have done since 2007. You accepted the report even though you should not have accepted it because it was wrong. That was your own failure. From 2007 to 2011, unauthorised absences increased from 27% to 33%. That is obviously failing. So, what you implemented in 2007 does not work. When will you recognise that whatever you tried to do did not work? Will you revisit it much sooner to make it work? Hopefully, you will not leave it for 10 years before you go back to it.

Mr Sweeney: I do not think that the report is wrong. There was a particular set of data in the report that I corrected today. It is my job professionally to do that.

Mr Clarke: You should have done it when you first saw the report.

Mr Sweeney: Ideally, yes, but I drew it to members' attention when I became aware of it.

You talked about failing, and I do not think it is helpful to get into that sort of discussion about what are very complex issues. With the report itself, there is no magic bullet. When you focus on unauthorised absence, we are talking about young people who have, in very many cases, multiple behavioural, social and cultural difficulties. So, the Department will do its level best, in conjunction with boards, schools, parents and communities, to tackle that. I do not want to give the impression this afternoon that there is some kind of magic bullet and that there is one single step that I can take now that will dramatically change that figure. The report is predicated on the work that Mr Taylor has been doing, and he has indicated that the focus should be more on overall attendance. I am not taking comfort from that but am just making an empirical statement that, although we are well out of kilter on unauthorised absence when you compare Northern Ireland with England, the reality is that, when you look at the overall performance on absence, you see that we are not dramatically out of kilter. I acknowledge that we need to do more, and I am completely open-minded about what additional steps we need to take. However, I would be false if I gave the impression this afternoon that there was a magic bullet or just one policy instrument that you just pull and, magically, all those complex issues disappear. They do not. This is about relentless attention to leadership in schools, involving the community, looking at data, relentlessly setting realistic targets and holding people such as me and people in the boards to account.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, thanks for the opportunity to come back again. Sometimes it is not helpful to be about too long, but homework clubs and breakfast clubs are not rocket science. They have been about for years. Parental connections with schools — I saw some of the best examples of that in Malawi in central Africa. The parents, if they were still alive, were there to support the school, but let us get back to the question. This computer system — C2k — is a wonderful invention, but the information is not available to the welfare service. What is the point in having a computer if it does not talk to anybody?

Mr Sweeney: I will shortly ask Clare to deal with C2k. Again, to say to the member —

Mr Dallat: I am really not interested in the computer, because we discovered at Millburn that it is not the computers that are bringing the pupils into the school. What are you doing with the information that is on these computers to alert the welfare service that there may be problems in the home, and there may be issues that need to be sorted out? It is not happening, according to this report.

Dr Mangan: Perhaps I can assist with that particular question. The C2k system is a school-based system, and there is a module on the system that is related to recording pupil absence. The system was introduced around the mid-2000s and has been used by schools to provide more accurate recording of absence in respect of am and pm and other breakdowns associated with it. The system is set up ostensibly as a school-based system. Education welfare officers (EWOs) access that system when they go into the school, because the data on that system is owned by the school. The school is the data owner. Therefore, the school needs to give permission to the EWOs to use that data.

The EWOs routinely access that data through various SIMs, inquiries and investigations that take place. One of the issues that has been raised in the report and is perhaps what you are referencing is that it might be helpful to establish means by which the education welfare officers could access the information without necessarily going into the school.

A pilot was done a few years ago, taking a very small sample of schools to identify some of the technical issues that required redress in order for EWOs to access the system from their offices. That coincided with the transformation of the C2k system in schools as a whole, which commenced around 2012. Further to recent engagement with C2k, its professional opinion is that we would need to recommence a pilot across the five boards in relation to EWO access from offices to ensure that the arrangements that need to facilitate optimum utilisation of it can be provided to all EWOs. So, the intention is that the pilot will commence in September 2014, with the aim of identifying what other technical issues may impact on EWOs accessing that information from their offices.

Mr Dallat: The road is paved with good intentions, and we have heard all talking about a strategy. I hate to ask the question, but I assume that this is not in the strategy?

Mr Sweeney: That whole issue about data collection and optimising the use of technology has been part of our strategic response to date but will, undoubtedly, be part of a strategic way forward. What Clare has outlined is that we are hopeful, as we move forward, that we can make better use of the technology that is available to us through that platform that is C2k.

Mr Dallat: But from what I hear, we are not even sure that you can share that information. It is certainly not available off-site. It belongs to the school. We know from our own research that schools have different approaches to it. Some take it seriously and others are not taking it seriously at all. Where do the warning lights come on in that computer to say that some poor child is in danger of going through the net?

Ms Alex Barr (Southern Education and Library Board): Would it be helpful if I explained how an EWO works within the system?

Mr Dallat: Anything would be helpful to solve the problem.

The Chairperson: Before you start, Alex, I should just say that the EWOs do not look good coming out of the report. It is not very good reading about the Education Welfare Service.

Ms Barr: If I may explain how the system works. Each school has a contact education welfare officer, and each school has a service level agreement with each education and library board. The service level agreement is set up for individual schools. In other words, if schools have a lot of attendance issues, they will get a lot more input from EWOs than for example, Millburn, where they have few attendance issues and they operate on a need-to basis with the school. We work on a referral system. In other words, the school is expected to do the initial intervention with the pupil's attendance, because the pupil is enrolled in that school. When that intervention fails, we expect the school, if the attendance goes down to 85%, to refer it to us. The EWO will then take up the case and work it. When attendance improves again, the case will be closed.

In order to make sure that schools do not omit referring any pupils, we do a termly audit in the school, involving the EWO going through the C2k system, identifying any pupil whose attendance is below 85% and talking to the contact person in the school about the attendance. At that point, if the EWO is

satisfied with the reason given by the school — ie if the pupil has had a lot of flu, has a broken leg or something like that — we say that that is fine and we are happy enough with that. However, if the school has no satisfactory reason for the pupil's attendance being below 85%, we will suggest that the school makes a referral to the Education Welfare Service.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms Barr. I am just conscious that members may be straying into people's area of questioning. A number of members have indicated that they want to make a comment, but, if it is their area of question, are you happy enough to hold it, or does anybody want to come in at this point in time?

Mr Copeland: I am not sure that what I am going to say has been covered at all. In the area that I represent, East Belfast, we have some of the best schools and some of the worst schools, with four of the poorest and four of the wealthiest wards side by side and 3,553 children living in poverty. Poverty is a moot word. Are we sure that we are not concentrating on establishing the number of children who do not go to school and losing the important thing, which is why they do not go to school and what can be done to persuade or require them to go to school?

Children, in many cases, are a potential source of income because of the nature of the benefits system, for example. There is barely a day in the week when I do not see some new syndrome, case or symptoms that indicate that a child might be entitled to disability living allowance, for example. I am not saying there is not a need, because there is a financial need, but I believe that, in some cases, children, by their behaviour and non-attendance, are actually acting out a subplot in a different piece of drama.

I have seen first- and second-year children at school gates drinking Boost and other energy drinks. The reason for that is that they will go berserk for about three or four hours in school and then present with a scenario of cases. I am just talking straight, because there is no point in coming here and beating around the bush. Do you feel that the current system of data adequately addresses what the symptoms are, what the cause is and whether or not they are real, and recognises that the child who does not go to school, in many cases, is the victim? Are we satisfied with the way we go about assessing? You can collect data until you are blue in the face, but unless you put it to some good, useful purpose, it does not count for diddly-squat. That is just being quite frank. Are we sure that we are doing everything possible to identify who is responsible for the child not attending school and making sure, by hook or by crook, that that changes? This has become the second or borderline third generation. If I had not gone to school, we had a thing called the beat man, and he would have got the policeman and then your parents would have been in trouble. My recollection is that it did not happen on the same scale, and now it is almost as if going to school is a self-selective choice.

The Chairperson: Before I let you back in again, I think that one or two members also wanted to make a comment on that point. Daithí, did you want to say something on Michael's point?

Mr McKay: It is on a separate point.

The Chairperson: OK. Paul, did you want to come in on that point?

Mr Girvan: It was really to go back to what we were dealing with previously about the accountability issue and the fact that a figure was given. How accurate that figure is something that needs to be delved into: the loss of money allocated to schools on their attendance or the number of pupils that are to attend. In the previous report from 2004 the figure worked out at a cost of £12 million roughly, and that has increased to £22 million a year that is lost due to children's non-attendance.

We hear about programmes that are mentioned as a way of dealing with issues, and the extended schools programme and all of that, and the £12.5 million being allocated to that, but what measures are being put in place to see that those benchmarking additional moneys are actually bringing back value? It does not appear to be adding to it, because there is a clear correlation between attendance and educational performance. It is very clear in this report that schools where children are attending have better results by far than schools where there is or appears to be no focus on ensuring that attendance is a key factor. I want to see how we can have a uniform approach.

You can have a school a mile from another school where there is a 10% difference in attendance records in one year, even though there is only a mile difference. Both of them are coming from a catchment area of similar social backgrounds, yet you can see that difference. When can we see that consistency coming across the board? If it is supposed to be dealt with on that basis, it is not

presenting in that way. I still bring that back to the leaders within those schools as not having some other aspect. I know that you are very quick to try to defend some of them, but I have seen teachers who I believe should never have been teachers because they turn children off, they humiliate them and they want to make them feel that size as opposed to feeling important. How to you deal with that?

Mr Sweeney: Chair, I want to apologise to the member first because I did not come back on the £22 million, so, can I take the opportunity now just to mention that?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: The report in the annexe sets out the methodology by which the figure of £22 million is ascertained.

Mr Girvan: It might be more.

Mr Sweeney: Well, if you just use the unauthorised absence and extrapolate from that, then £3,000 per pupil in a primary and £4,000 per pupil in the post-primary. These figures are approximate, but when you add that up, it is £22 million. Now, is that a waste of money? Is it a shameful waste of money by the Department? Should the accounting officer be concerned about this? The sad thing is that the opportunity cost is to the pupil. It is the pupil and, by extension the parents condoning the child not going to school, who is losing out there. As far as the education is concerned, it is a sunk cost anyway, so the opportunity cost is at the pupil level.

Getting back to Mr Copeland's point —

Mr Girvan: Before moving off that, if a school has an attendance record of, say, below 84% or 85%, then, conversely, if they believe that they were going to have their budget hit by a margin that was below what the average should have been, they would take measures to address the attendance within that school. If they thought that it was going to hit their budget and that therefore they thought that they were going to have to let teachers go or do something else, then I think that there would be more of a focus on it.

Mr Sweeney: I will come back to that, but, on Mr Copeland's point, let me just state the obvious. There is sadly a very direct correlation between levels of absence and schools that are in stressful situations. As you know, in extremis, if the inspectorate assesses a school and the school finds that it needs special intervention, it goes into formal intervention. So, if you take that benchmark of 85% and below, sadly, there is a very consistent — this is the point about the relevancy of data — clear correlation between high levels of absence and high levels of educational underachievement, and a direct correlation between a number of schools that are in formal intervention that have high levels of absence. With regard to the profile of schools that Mr Copeland spoke of, there are a number of schools. So, for example, if I were to target tonight, 37 post-primary schools and five primary schools have attendance records of below 90%. Let us start there.

In respect of the remarks about teachers, I do not think that I am in a position this afternoon to comment on that. Obviously the profession does its level best to have a performance regime in place and to identify where teachers are underperforming so that they are given the right support.

In respect of the point that you made about a school being in close proximity to another, yes, part of that is about leadership. Of that there is no doubt, but, likewise, you need to look at the profile of the school. One school might have a very low level of special educational needs or a very low level of free school meals entitlement, which is a proxy for disadvantage, whereas the characteristics of another school might be dramatically different. So, you have to see every school in its own context. As the report itself says, we need to be flexible and pragmatic about how we respond. Clare, do you want to make a point about the data?

Dr Mangan: My point is that we can talk about attendance in general, but it is important to bear in mind that children are at school for what is ostensibly 12 years of compulsory education. The strategies that need to be applied throughout those 12 years to address attendance need to be different. One of the core issues is that in primary data, the attendance of children in years 1 and 2 tends to be a lot lower than children in years 3, 4, 5 and 6. You have to ask the question, "Why?" One of the key things that we have to bear in mind is that children need parents to bring them to school. If parents have issues about arriving at school late or not arriving at school at all, it

immediately impacts on the attendance of very young children. In doing so, very young children then acquire habits and behaviours associated with going to school or not going to school that are enforced and reinforced at an early age.

What I am really trying to emphasise is that as we get into the detail of what we need to do across the 12 years of compulsory education, the data provides us with evidence that whilst we might be thinking overall that there is less of an issue in primary, my analysis of the data is that there are issues in primary that require redress, but they are perhaps masked by the fact that the overall attendance in primary is deemed to be better than post-primary, yet I believe that it will require very specific approaches and interventions. Likewise, at post-primary level, across schools, the schools that I am regularly in emphasise the fact that attendance is important, but it is also about the engagement and participation of the young person in education. The more adjustments that schools make, not just in terms of the curriculum but in terms of the sense of creating the school as a community, the culture and ethos of the school as a welcoming one for the young person and other forms of support for young people who have difficulties, the more likely you are to get pupils to attend. What I am really saying is that if we are going to focus on how we can improve things, we need to be developmentally sensitive to the approaches that are required as we move our way through the school system.

The Chairperson: I know that Ross and Daithí are looking in, and Seán and Paul had indicated earlier, but I am conscious of time. We have our lines of questioning in front of us, and some members may have strayed into that. So, if it is OK and members are content — Ross, is there something that is pressing?

Mr Hussey: I want to ask specifically about the Education Welfare Service. I want a point of clarity because of the way this is worded:

"A school can make a referral to EWS".

It does not appear to be compulsory. EWS seems to be able to go in and look for this or whatever, but there is no direct link. I find it very strange that in these days of computers we cannot have a link or that a teacher cannot, whenever they see a certain trend, email somebody to warn them or whatever. When you see this 15%, and I am sure this has been mentioned before, that could mean up to 28 days a year missing from school. There is something not right.

I want clarification. The report states that schools can make a referral. Can they or must they? If they do not, there is something not right. At what point does the 85% become 85%? In the first term, you could have eight weeks, and then that could be 12 days absent. So, at what point does the referral come in?

You also made the comment that someone could have continual flu. If a child continually had the flu, I would be worried about their health as well. If it is 15%, there is something not right, and if a child is continually ill, there is something not right. If they had a broken leg, the school would make some form of compensation to get them in, even should they have to carry them in. That this is optional, I find very strange.

Mr McQuillan: I think that the 15% point at which it is triggered is far too high. The trigger should be a lot sooner. Can I have your thoughts on that, Alex?

Ms Barr: The figure was agreed some years ago as one that would be manageable, and it is in common with the figures that are used in England.

Mrs Gillan: It is also useful to add that the actual arrangements are that the school should refer where there is a concern or the 85%, so certainly —

Mr McQuillan: Surely the school is well aware of the trend before it gets to that target. You might see it every Tuesday or Wednesday that a child is not there, whatever the reason is, whether it is what they are doing on a Tuesday or a Wednesday or what their parents are doing on a Tuesday or a Wednesday.

Mr Hussey: If England is using the system and it is working for them but it is not working for us, you should increase it to maybe 90% to get the buy-in and the intervention quicker.

Mrs Gillan: The interesting thing about England, and we mentioned it earlier, is that there is a very different culture over there which is very much sanctions-based, with schools or local authorities being able to issue fixed-penalty fines without recourse to the courts. If they are not paid, they are doubled, and eventually you move to prosecutions. There is a number of other things going on in the background in England over and above the use of education welfare.

Mr Hussey: That is in the news at the minute, with children being taken out of school to go on holidays because it is cheaper.

Mrs Gillan: Absolutely. Up until recently, and this affects some of the authorised/unauthorised figures, principals in England had the ability to authorise term-time holidays of up to 10 days a year for special circumstances. Certainly, Charlie Taylor, the Government's advisor, found that principals tended to do that to avoid confrontation with parents. So, it was almost a given that they got 10 days' authorisation. That changed in September past, hence the publicity around the issue and parents being taken to court. That ability has been taken away from principals.

The position in Northern Ireland is as it is now in England, in that principals can only authorise school holidays in exceptional circumstances. Otherwise, they are unauthorised absences. So it will be interesting to see if the English figures for next year change. Regardless of that, the overall absence figures in England are ahead of ours to some degree.

Mr Hussey: Is any consideration being given to increasing that to 90% from 85%?

Mr Sweeney: Not actively, but obviously the deliberations of this group will be important.

The Chairperson: To go back to the Education Welfare Service, as I said earlier, the report does not make good reading around that, and there seems to be a degree of complacency. Do you agree with that, given that the Department funds the Education Welfare Service to the tune of £1.7 million? Is it delivering an effective service?

Mr Sweeney: I do not approach these Committees in a way that seeks to be defensive, but I do not recognise "complacency" as a term that I would use in relation to the inspectorate. The £1.7 million is a top-up that we give to the service. In total, overall, there is about £8.8 million going into the Education Welfare Service. It was evaluated by the inspectorate in 2002. There was a follow-up report in 2006. The inspectorate report was very positive about the contribution that the EWS was making in responding to and managing attendance, from preventative work right through to sanctions. So, Chair, I would not describe it as being complacent.

The Chairperson: Do you believe that the ETI has delivered or produced any report that offers any guidance at all in that area?

Mr Sweeney: It evaluated the effectiveness of the Education Welfare Service in 2002. Then, it did a follow-up report in 2006. I appreciate that that was some time back. That was the last time that the Education Welfare Service was evaluated.

The Chairperson: Obviously, there needs to be a more strategic approach to it from the ETI.

Mr Sweeney: Let me say that there is always scope in the Department, boards and any element of education for improvement. You start with that premise, right? You do not say, "This is perfect." However, the report has, as a result of our engaging in the Department and with the boards, challenged us to give more impetus to that work.

It might be helpful, Clare, if you outline the commitment that the five chief executives of the education and library boards are embarking upon specifically in response to the shortcomings that were identified in the report. Would you be happy enough, Chair, that we do that?

The Chairperson: Yes, absolutely. I think that the rationale for saying this is that I am just conscious that, in England in Wales, the education and training inspectorates have produced thematic reports in that area. I think that it would be key. Chris wants to come in on this.

Mr Hazzard: Paul, thanks for your answers so far. My question really relates to the ETI — just to get a better grasp of the subject. To what extent does the ETI look at absenteeism as it goes along inspecting schools? Does it look at targets and outcomes in much detail? Does it offer advice?

Mr Sweeney: Well, yes. When the ETI does a report, it focuses on a number of areas. Absenteeism is under that, if you like, heading of pastoral care: to what extent is the school over and above the pedagogy, the education, looking after the emotional well-being of the child? So, in that regard, if a school were triggering thresholds, the ETI would draw attention to that in its report.

The role of the district inspector is also important here. The district inspector is on the ground. He or she has a dedicated range of schools with which they work. So, there is proactivity there. I take Mr Hussey's point about whether thresholds are set at the right level. A district inspector could tell a school — I am just being hypothetical here — that, "I have noticed that you have dropped down from a credible performance of 93% five years ago. You are hitting 90%. You are in danger of going below 90%. What is happening?" So, there is a challenge function — albeit a relatively informal one — that take place right from the district inspector. Then, of course, when you get the full inspection report, there is a range of indicators. If there is a plummeting of performance on attendance, the inspector can draw attention to that, largely because the reason, as we know, can be directly related to a whole range of other issues.

Mr Hazzard: Yes; I will come to that later on the sharing of good practice. I think that the role of district inspectors is crucial to improvement. Is it not happening, then? In those areas where the figures are quite high, are the DIs not doing what they should be doing to help? It is innovative. I totally accept that there is no magic bullet here and that there is only so much that the Department and schools can actually do. However, is there something that DIs should do more of?

Mr Sweeney: Certainly, there are opportunities. On the ground, it might be appropriate to say, "Look, why don't you pair with a school that had a similar profile a number of years ago and has turned it around?" A large part of the report suggests, and rightly so, that we need to create greater networks where schools, particularly those that underperform, can come together and share experience. Now, you would bring in schools that are exemplars as well. In the first instance, the district inspector could draw attention to that. I would like to think that he or she would then say, "Can I suggest the following?", or, in addition to that, the school should be involved in a very serious discussion with the Education Welfare Service. So, there needs to be greater focus on prevention and early intervention. We need to do more of that. I accept that entirely.

Mr Hazzard: Finally, do you think we should embed the issues around absenteeism more in the inspection process?

Mr Sweeney: A good example of the relevance of the group is that, when we met last year and did literacy and numeracy, one of your core recommendations was that we should look at good practice and disseminate it. So the Department, subsequent to the PAC meeting last year, tasked the inspectorate to draw up best practice. In that case, the focus was around mathematics and English. The inspectorate went to schools that were exemplars in English and maths. We brought out a publication and now have disseminated that, so nearly 500 teachers have been proactively engaged with the inspectorate on that good practice guidance. The logic of this session is that we need to do something similar. We need to look at good practice, commend and acknowledge it and then disseminate it.

The Chairperson: Briefly, Seán, then Daithí.

Mr Rogers: It is a very small point. Paul, forgive me, but that highlights the disconnect between the Department and the ETI again. We heard this morning in our ETI inquiry in the Education Committee that the DI only has a total of 10 days per year to do all of his district inspection functions in addition to general inspection. As part of our inquiry, we met the DIs, and they are drawn in 10 different directions. They actually do not have time to do all of that. That is the big problem.

Mr McKay: I will keep it as short as I can. I just want to focus on the area of health for a moment. Obviously, there are a number of cases in schools where pupils have to be off for weeks at a time or a month at a time, and it can be very hard to catch up on the work again. It can lead to their whole educational year being ruined. What approach or strategy do schools have to deal with that? We are living in the age of Skype, and everybody is keeping up to speed with each other through the internet.

I wonder if there are options there, whereby pupils can still engage with or listen in on classes when they are not able to attend the school.

I also think breakfast clubs are excellent. There is a relationship between how healthy you are, having a breakfast and your performance in education, your attention span and everything. Are we doing enough on breakfast clubs? Is there an opportunity to extend those further? It is not always down to your socioeconomic background. A child gets up in the morning, falls out of bed, falls into the car and falls out of the car and into the school without getting a breakfast or anything. I know of a number of cases like that. Are the Department and boards doing enough on breakfast clubs and also on safer routes to school? I know that Sustrans has put a focus on that area, because exercise in the morning certainly increases alertness and attention. As well as environmental and health impacts, it also affects education, so we should not just focus on strictly educational matters. It is much wider than that.

Dr Mangan: I will consider some of the areas. I will take the area of children who are absent from school for considerable periods. It is important to differentiate between the impact of a longer-term absence and that of short and frequent absences. It is generally thought that, with children who have a long-term absence, although it may appear to be more difficult and challenging to deal with, it is actually a discrete period of time between the last day they were in school and the first day that they return to school. In situations like that, if children are going to be off school for a period of time, the medical reports and medical recommendation [*Inaudible.*] which provide links between the school and home when the young person is at home and is well enough to access education. In some instances, work is being done through Illuminate in relation to other forms of support, predicated, of course, of the appropriate consents.

The bigger worry for us relates to pupils who have short and frequent absences, because those are the young people who dip in and dip out of school. They are less likely to get into what I would call a school routine. They are less familiar with schoolwork. They get part of a topic but not all the topic. They are the group that I consider to be most vulnerable and, in terms of their absences, most likely to have a negative impact on education work.

You raised the issue of healthy schools and things schools can do over and above breakfast clubs. In some schools, that would be reflected in canteen options, if the school has a canteen. It is also reflected in healthy-eating breaks and other things that are done in the school to promote the health and well-being of the person.

On the wider health and well-being agenda, a number of schools see themselves as being defined as mentally healthy schools, because there is a recognition that the attendance of teachers as well as the attendance of pupils is important in bringing stability and continuity to not only the quality of the teaching experience but the levels of engagement and attachment that children have with teachers. In a sense, training has been provided in some boards in relation to promoting mentally healthy schools.

Other work is generally done around promoting health and well-being as part of the wider school curriculum. That is being done at primary and post-primary level through counselling services and other forms of school-based support. As we move forward, we see the totality of need of the young person and recognise that various strands of specific and specialised supports need to be put in place to effect the best outcomes in terms of the particular needs of individuals.

Mr McKay: Is there going to be an increased resource towards those areas, given that there is increased recognition of the benefits of those breakfast clubs and so on? How does the Department measure the impact of those on educational performance?

Dr Mangan: I cannot comment on the resource. Indeed, some things that happen in schools can be resource-neutral. They do not always have to bring or cause additionality of funding. Some schools have banned fizzy drinks and taken other actions because they wanted to create a context where concentration enhanced focus on learning. Although we do not have strong data, we would have qualitative data that would indicate that the measures that have been put in place are effecting some change in pupil engagement at school.

Mr Sweeney: Free schools meals cost approximately £40 million, and 80,000 pupils are entitled to them. That will increase by 15,000 pupils. In terms of evaluating effectiveness, things like the extended schools programme were evaluated by the inspectorate and had a positive evaluation. Other programmes were recently put in place. The Minister announced a community-based fund of £2

million a year, which, again, is targeted at the most disadvantaged areas and at involving the community and parents in the life of a school.

We are flexible about how that money can be spent. There is a fair degree of flexibility about how a school can work with the community and parents. It may not necessarily be an extension of the breakfast club; there are a range of other interesting ideas coming through. Where possible, additional resources are being targeted at schools in the most challenging circumstances.

Mr Girvan: A term you used was "entitled" to free schools meals. Would it not be better to use the term "uptake" of free school meals? A number of people who are entitled to them do not necessarily apply for them. I know of one school where quite a few kids could be getting free school meals, but, because of a bit of pride in their family, there is a reluctance for them to even engage in that. That is greater in some areas than others, so I do not like using that term "entitled". I would say the uptake of free school meals, because there could be many who are entitled to them who do not take them.

Dr Mangan: There is an issue with entitlement and uptake, and the data that we have pertaining to that indicate that schools where there had been an issue with the gap between entitlement and uptake are having more constructive positive conversations with parents about it, not only from the point of view of the benefit to the young person but from the point of view that it has an impact on the funding for the school. The evidence is that, whilst there is still room for improvement, we can see some significant changes in uptake in areas and in schools that historically have not elected to avail themselves of it.

Mr McKay: There is an issue about stigma and stigmatisation around free school meals as well. Some schools have a card system so that you do not see free school meal entitlement. How is that being rolled out? Do schools have those kinds of systems to deal with that?

Dr Mangan: It depends on the school. Some schools now even have electronic systems that do not involve a card at all. It is becoming more covert, but it depends on the school.

Mr McKay: Are there still a lot of schools that give out the meal tickets?

Dr Mangan: It will still happen, but it happens less, particularly at post-primary level, as other systems come into place that are deemed to be more reliable and more pupil-sensitive.

Mr McKay: Do we have any idea of the scale of that?

Dr Mangan: I could not tell you today, but, if it is helpful, I could forward some information subsequently.

The Chairperson: I will bring members in to do their formal questioning. I do not want to scare you; I am conscious that a lot of members have already asked their questions. So, I can say that this end of the session may be brief, in case you are wondering whether we will keep you here for the rest of the day.

We are talking about early intervention to address levels of absenteeism, and one of the Programme for Government commitment programmes, Incredible Years, is a very good initiative. That is a parent and mentoring initiative that has developed a community base, and it involves the parents in a programme of working with the community and the school, understanding children's absence from school, what that is all about and how they can go forward with that. I am very conscious that the Department is running a number of good programmes through the Programme for Government. Somebody may want to touch on that later.

As I said, a lot of members have already asked their questions, so this session might be brief. The Deputy Chairperson will ask about progress on developing strategies to improve attendance. Alex and Adrian, you will touch on the role of the education welfare officers.

Mr McQuillan: I am sorted.

The Chairperson: Alex, what about you?

Mr Easton: I will just go ahead anyway.

The Chairperson: Seán, you have management of information systems.

Mr Rogers: I have a wee bit left.

The Chairperson: Daithí, your area is learning from good practice, and you touched on that as well, as did Chris. Michael, you will ask about socio-economic issues, if you want to come back in.

Mr Copeland: I have not started yet.

Mr Dallat: This is timely, Chairperson, and I take your advice; I will be brief. My questions are about moving forward. This is not a criticism, but I did not detect the kind of passion that is required to solve a very serious problem. All the members of the Public Accounts Committee got caught up in this, because we are conscious that we are talking about individuals who will go on to have families and may pass on those terrible weaknesses in education to the next generation. We referred earlier to those who, unfortunately, ended up in prison, largely because they had no self-esteem, were patronised by druggies, paramilitaries and all kinds of people who gave them a kind of importance that the education system did not.

That said, the hearing has been very useful. Paul, the strategy that you have come up with suggests to me, and other members highlighted the fact, that the district inspectors, the education welfare officers and the leaders in the schools all need to be a team. My memory was that a welfare officer was almost an inconvenience. He went into a corner of an office somewhere with a briefcase and he spotted individuals: he or she did their best. However, this requires a lot more than that, Paul. It requires more than a computer sitting in a school that no one can get access to outside the school; it requires early alerts; it requires people going out into the homes where there is serious disadvantage, perhaps alcoholism or all sorts of illnesses. Is this strategy going to be different from what was promised in 2004? Is this very excellent publication going to be taken up seriously? Are we going to detect from the Department the kind of passion that we experienced in those schools that have bucked the system and have turned themselves around in the most disadvantaged areas? It is a plea more than a question. Is it going to happen?

Mr Sweeney: Do you want me to talk about the education welfare officer being an inconvenience in the corner?

Ms Barr: You are correct; that may have been the picture 20 years ago. It is certainly not the picture in schools nowadays with education welfare officers. Education welfare officers regularly meet teachers to discuss attendance issues, so they would not be seen as an inconvenience in the corner; they will be seen as a key part —

Mr Dallat: Sorry, Alex; your answer is helpful, and I am not disputing that. However, can a welfare officer feel passionate about this? Can he or she go banging on the door of the principal's office?

Ms Barr: Yes, they can make a nuisance of themselves.

Mr Dallat: And say, "While you are writing press statements about your achievements, little Jonny down there has not been at school for eight weeks." Can they do that, and do they have that authority?

Ms Barr: Yes, EWOs are very passionate about their job. They would not be doing it if they were not —

Mr Dallat: Good.

Ms Barr: — because they are not paid as much as a lot of other people in different areas who have similar qualifications. If you are an education welfare officer, you are passionate about your job; that is part of your story basically.

Not only do they meet school staff regularly, they also go out and meet parents regularly. Clare mentioned earlier that, quite often, the issue with children in primary school is not the child not getting into school; it is the parent not getting the child into school. Therefore, they work with parents to help them to set up boundaries for their children and they do some very basic stuff that you expect parents to be able to do, but sometimes those parents have a lot of challenges in their life and they cannot

cope. We deal with parents who suffer from alcohol abuse, substance abuse and domestic violence. There is a whole range of issues, and a lot of those parents simply cannot cope with getting their children to school on a regular basis. Sometimes the EWO is the only person going into that family who is doing that type of work. They try to get the parent motivated to get the child into school in the morning, and they help the parent to set targets for their child, even if it is only a simple sheet of paper to put stars on on the days when they are at school. The EWO is really motivated and works alongside those parents.

Mr Dallat: Can I stop you there, Alex? Recently, I paid a visit to Sure Start in Coleraine, and I was extremely impressed. However, the staff there told me that the areas in which Sure Start can be of help do not just magically fit into the wards. Who can bring about a situation where Sure Start can help parents in trouble, say, up the Mountsandel Road in Coleraine, which is perceived to be middle class, but we know that there are people there who need help?

Ms Barr: That is part of the difficulty. If they do not fit into the particular region, they will not get help from Sure Start.

Mr Dallat: What is happening with that?

Mr McQuillan: Especially nowadays, when there is so much private renting, people are moving out in that direction to get a house to suit their family. I think that you need to change with the situation and the times.

Mr Dallat: Is that something that you have addressed? You are obviously aware of it, Alex.

Ms Barr: I am aware of it, but I am not quite sure how to tackle it, to be honest. We will keep working with parents —

Mr Dallat: Is that not something that we need to do? Adrian and I and others know that the children are not in the right wards to get the support and help that they need.

Ms Barr: Sometimes there are ways of getting support for the parent that is above and beyond the EWO —

Mr Dallat: A percentage.

Ms Barr: Yes; you can sometimes refer them to family support hubs if they are willing to go that way. A lot of the parents would not be keen to go down the route of social services, but they see the family support hub as a more friendly method of getting some support.

Mr Dallat: Can I suggest that you go away and think seriously about this? There is a serious problem. Adrian is quite right: private renting has made complete nonsense of dividing areas up.

The Chairperson: It goes back to the fact that this is targeted at neighbourhood renewal areas, and a lot of these families are outside those areas.

Mr Hussey: If you are going to go away and look at that, can we get some form of response on what is to be done? It is not only a problem in Coleraine; it is a problem in Omagh, too. We all have the same problem.

Mrs Gillan: I understand that there is to be a review of Sure Start. I am not sure exactly what stage that is at, but we can certainly clarify that and provide details to the Committee. Sure Start has been going for some years now and is due to be reviewed in the near future.

Mr Dallat mentioned the need for passion going forward, so I want to try to convey that passion on behalf of the Department. As Mr Girvan mentioned, the schools doing really well are those with passionate principals, and that is reflected in their attendance figures.

Mr Dallat: Would you encourage that, Caroline?

Mrs Gillan: I would definitely encourage that.

Mr Dallat: You would not bog them down in bureaucracy, would you?

Mrs Gillan: This is the interesting thing. We need the strategy to move forward, as Paul said, but the Department is not about to sit in its office in Rathgael, as pleasant as that is, and draft a strategy for a year. At the same time, we are, through speaking to principals, establishing a network of seminars, the first being in the summer term. The idea, which comes very much from speaking recently to principals on nurture issues, is that they appreciate being in a room together. That allows them to exchange best practice and talk to and learn from one another. So that is exactly how we will move forward. We will choose the schools carefully, whether that means dividing them into primary and post-primary, or schools who are doing well and those doing not so well.

It does not end there. We will take views from principals on whether they want further guidance. We do not want to create guidance that will simply sit on the shelf; it needs to be useful. We are seeing whether we can do something with ESaGS.tv or through having direct and ongoing engagement with principals that will involve ETI, EWS and schools, because, as you mentioned, everybody has a role to play. I assure you that we are grasping this and actioning it directly with principals.

The Chairperson: I go back to the neighbourhood renewal area issue. Something should be done to ensure that the Department is working in collaboration with others. We need to expand neighbourhood renewal status because many families who could benefit are outside those areas. We catch a brave number of families in the neighbourhood renewal areas, but other families are harder to reach. Also, there are trans-generational issues among families who move outside the neighbourhood renewal areas. Those are the families we have to target, so I would appreciate your sending the Committee information on that.

John, you are content with your questions?

Mr Dallat: Yes, thank you, Chairperson. I apologise, but I have to leave.

The Chairperson: OK. Alex or Adrian, do you have anything to add?

Mr McQuillan: I have just one question: can there be some joined-up working between Sure Start and neighbourhood renewal and the EWOs? They work at too great a distance from each other. Is Sure Start led by DSD?

Mrs Gillan: No, the project is led by the Department of Education, but there is input from others. In Sure Start, there is input from the Department of Health and a number of agencies. Likewise, in neighbourhood renewal, although DSD has the lead, it is all joined up. The good thing emerging from the Delivering Social Change programme that the Executive recently launched is more joined-up work between Departments. We join DSD on nurture, and the Department for Employment and Learning works on family support hubs, which link in well with the work of EWS. On the ground, EWOs link into that work, so greater cross-departmental working is definitely the way forward.

Ms Barr: A couple of ongoing programmes include a transition programme funded by DSD, through neighbourhood renewal, in the Dungannon and Coalisland area. It supports young people in the transition from P7 to year 8. It picks up and supports pupils who seem to be having problems with the transition. Also, mentoring support tutors are funded by DSD, through neighbourhood renewal, in Omagh, Dungannon and Armagh, and another is coming on line in Craigavon. So there is quite a bit of EWS neighbourhood renewal going on.

Mr Hussey: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr McQuillan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Easton: The Audit Office report raised an issue with the lack of mechanisms in place to support young people disengaged from school. What mechanisms might be put in place to provide the support that they need?

Dr Mangan: When we start looking at issues of engagement or lack of engagement, we see that, sometimes, it can happen at the individual pupil level and can arise when familial issues impact on the young person's willingness to attend school. In other words, stresses at home are such that the young person wants to be at home and does not wish to be in school. Other issues can arise at post-primary

level when peers, as a cohort, decide not to go to school. That can happen in particular communities when, collectively, a group of young people decide that they do not wish to go to school. Those are two very clear examples of where different strategies need to be applied.

I identified particular projects in certain parts of the Province for young people who are more vulnerable and have been involved in drug misuse or alcohol abuse, for example, but for whom, at the same time, we wanted to facilitate engagement with the school. There are also programmes that make the connection between education and health and social services for some of the case management arrangements and other family conferencing arrangements that should apply. Work is also being done between education and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) with young people who have significant mental health needs but need support. The Time Out for Positive Steps (TOPS) programme in the Belfast area is for young people identified through CAMHS as having underpinning mental health issues that impact on attendance and for whom other forms of educational support in a context other than school is being provided so that they access at least part of the curriculum to support their needs.

We are trying to put in place a range of measures, dependent on the assessed need of the individual or the group of young people about whom we are concerned.

Mr Easton: Do you accept that, since 2004, you have been a wee bit slow to put these mechanisms in place?

Dr Mangan: My view is that we have put a lot of mechanisms in place. Perhaps we have not been as overt as we could have been about what those mechanisms are. There is an issue about being more explicit about the work being done and making the connection between some of the work that has been done, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups and attendance, and recognising that although the core issue in the headlights may not have been attendance, the participation and engagement were about attendance with a view to assisting people to achieve.

Mr Easton: There were 16,000 cases of persistent absence but not necessarily 16,000 pupils persistently absent. There could be multiple pupils having 15% of days off. Is that right? Do we know how many pupils the figure of 16,000 cases applies to?

Ms Barr: My understanding is that 16,000 pupils had attendance of under 85%. However, it does not identify pupils who might not be fit to attend school for whatever reason.

Mr Easton: How can you assure the Committee that all 16,000 cases have been followed up and assessed as needing to be referred or not? How can we be sure?

Ms Barr: As I said, EWS does a termly audit in each school across Northern Ireland. That identifies any pupils that have under 85% attendance. Then, a conversation takes place with the school to identify whether it is aware of the reason or whether the absence requires follow-up.

Mr Easton: So there have been 16,000 conversations.

Ms Barr: Yes.

Mr Easton: That is a lot of conversations.

Ms Barr: It is.

Mrs Gillan: I should add that, just last year, the Department tightened up its guidance on school absence and strongly emphasised the need for schools to put in place early intervention strategies. That guidance has applied since September of the current school year and is based on the experience of a working group of EWOs and school principals. Since then, we have been much more explicit about what we expect of schools and what we need to do.

Mr Easton: Following the Audit Office report of 2004, there is little evidence of a joined-up approach in the delivery of the education welfare system across the boards. There is a continual debate on the need for a joined-up approach to service provision, and the EWS is no different. Given that the lack of a joined-up approach was raised in the first report and again in this one, what will you do to address that, and why has nothing been done since 2004?

Dr Mangan: I will start by outlining what was done post-2004. In 2004, some of the issues raised related to the professional qualifications of those in the EWS across the five boards. We now have a Northern Ireland Social Care Council professional development framework that relates to the qualifications and supervision of EWOs, which had not been in place prior to that date. Alex may wish to elaborate on elements of that. I want you to have some sense of the fact that many issues dealt with post-2004 related to the professional competencies of EWOs' professional registration framework; the recognition of specific targeted work within the Education Welfare Service for groups such as looked-after children and school-age mothers, and dedicated staff in the service worked to meet those needs. Further work was done better to align what the chief EWO and education welfare officers did at local level. I will ask Alex to give more specific detail about the monthly meetings and other frameworks put in place across the Province.

Ms Barr: The chief education welfare officers meet once a month. We look at policy and strategy in the service and the need to deal with any particular issue that comes up. Education welfare has a common referral form that comes in from schools. No matter what part of Northern Ireland you live in, the same referral form is used for children. We use the same assessment form to assess the needs of the young people referred to us. It is called understanding the needs of children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI). The form is also used by other agencies such as social services and health. We then develop a plan of work for the young person. That is supervised by the senior education welfare officer. Built-in supervision is an important part of the work and is required by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. Once the work is ongoing, it can involve an EWO working with a young person face to face, one to one; working with a group of young people; or, if a child is very young, working with his or her parents. So a wide range of work may be ongoing. If young people are involved in drugs, alcohol abuse or particularly risky behaviour, the EWO might have to involve other agencies to get them the appropriate advice and assistance from a specialist agency.

The EWS has common systems of recording case work so that everything is recorded to a standard that meets the requirements of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. We also have a common method for closing cases and recording the closure once they conform to an acceptable pattern or level of attendance. Those are the levels of common practice across Northern Ireland that all EWOs and education and library board services will be — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Easton: Taking parents to court as a last resort seems to go on forever and a day. It is a very complicated and stressful route, which does not seem to achieve much because of the time involved. Are you looking at other mechanisms that might do away with that?

Ms Barr: We have to work within the current legislative framework. When we get to the point with a family or young person at which we feel that doing supportive work is not going anywhere and we have to take some sort of action — otherwise the board would be failing in its duty to ensure that the young person has an education — we have two options. One is going down the route of an education supervision order under the legislation provided by the Children Order; the other is prosecuting parents under the Education and Libraries Order. We consider which appears to be the most appropriate option. If a young person is out of control or the parent or parents are deemed to be at fault, it is likely that we will go down the route of parental prosecution. If we think that we can work with the parents, and the child is very young, we will probably go down the route of an education supervision order. We have not been particularly good at using those in the past, but we are moving towards using them more, especially with younger children.

I agree with you that prosecuting parents has not been particularly successful, as demonstrated by many repeat prosecutions. Parents prosecuted once are often prosecuted again the following year, but the young person still does not attend. That is a problem.

Other young people fall into the category of being a child in need by virtue of the fact that their parents do not ensure that they are educated. However, we cannot get a referral to social services except *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Easton: Can we get the costs for those court cases over the past several years?

Ms Barr: Yes, I can provide those for you. The Magistrates' Court is relatively cheap to prosecute through. Prosecutions under the Children Order cost a couple of hundred pounds, which can add up.

Mr Easton: It would be interesting to know the total.

Irrespective of when, or if, ESA is established, what are your thoughts on the Audit Office's recommendation that the Department consider a more joined-up and consistent approach in the provision of the EWS under the current five-board structure?

Dr Mangan: I met chief executive colleagues recently to discuss the content of the report. All five chief executives are fully committed to supporting the implementation of its recommendations. We recognise the need to bring enhanced consistency to the delivery of attendance issues, not just through the Education Welfare Service but through other mechanisms available to us and, indeed, through other services. It is important to stipulate that other services can also have a role in supporting and promoting attendance. The view across the five boards is that, at board level, we can give enhanced prominence to attendance. We can do so through the wider school improvement agenda; the quarterly reports of the education committee in each board; or other equivalent structures that ensure that attention is given to the issue.

From an EWS perspective, the view of the chief executives was that we should have a common regional action plan, with individual ELB targets to reflect local and specific need. We felt that that would be the most appropriate way of ensuring that we were working to a regional framework but still recognising the individual and specific needs of ELBs. There was recognition of the enhanced focus on attendance in school development plans and a realisation that there is also inter-disciplinary work between CASS officers, the Education Welfare Service and other board services that record attendance. Referrals to the educational psychology service, for example, record attendance on the referral form to ascertain whether a child has needs that are intrinsic to their difficulty or whether attendance is part of that difficulty.

I will detail a few other aspects that we think we can introduce to bring further alignment. More work will be done on the procurement of the Education Welfare Service's education management systems (EMS), which have been in place for 10 years. Through new procurement, we will have the opportunity, in the next 18 months, to put forward more specific business requirements on the type of data sets and reports that we want those systems to generate on our behalf.

The report recognises that increased coherence should be brought to training for boards of governors on the significance of attendance. We are committed to doing that. Given that we will be reconstituting boards of governors with effect from September 2014, we deem that this is an opportune time to do that.

Finally, work on the interface between the C2k system in schools and the access of the Education Welfare Service to that system is being progressed with immediate effect to do what we can to minimise any difficulties identified to date.

The Chairperson: Before we move away from the EWOs, I want to ask a further question. I am going back a couple of years to what happened in my area. Is there a pathway for young juveniles who we have no chance of getting back to school and for whom the court option did not work? Could a young male or female go to an establishment other than a school to do alternative non-academic activities? Does that happen?

Ms Barr: Not particularly. When young people begin to drop out of education, schools try to be flexible and create a curriculum around them that might enable them to engage. Youth Service and EWO work is ongoing, and some boards are trying to identify the young people disaffected with education and provide support from year 8 on, with particular support at years 11 and 12. We have identified a number of schools, and the Youth Service and EWS will work jointly on that.

Dr Mangan: Across the boards, we also have education other than at school (EOTAS) provision for young people who are very disaffected with school. The first port of call for EOTAS is usually participation and engagement and then a gradual settling into achievement issues.

Work on therapeutic levels of support has been developed on a project basis. That was piloted in the Western board some years ago, with interventions between child and adolescent mental health services and educators to try to encourage families to recognise the need to engage with key agencies to address not only pupil improvement but other family-based issues.

The Chairperson: Finally, the report states that the chief education welfare officer told the Audit Office that schools were discouraged from referring cases, yet the chief executives of the ELBs said that that was not the practice. We were concerned when we read that. What is the truth?

Ms Barr: The truth is that, in general, EWOs would not discourage schools from making referrals to the Education Welfare Service. I think that we need to unpick this a little. Sometimes, if a school makes a referral to the EWS without having made any intervention itself, an EWO will ask the school to carry out some basic intervention to see whether it can resolve the situation. The pupil is enrolled in a school, so the prime responsibility is initially with the school, and it is only right that it should carry out the initial intervention, at least to the extent of informing parents that they think that there is an issue before passing it to the Education Welfare Service.

Other instances in which that may happen, albeit that it would be very unusual, is if a school makes a large number of referrals on, say, 30 June. There is absolutely no point in an EWO picking up a load of cases on 30 June when he or she knows that children will be absent for two months. There is no point in an EWO engaging with the family and asking them to ensure that their child attends regularly. In those circumstances, an EWO will probably ask that those cases be referred again in September. Those are the situations in which an EWO might discourage referrals. We are a very small resource, and we feel that it is appropriate for schools to make the initial intervention before referring cases to us.

The Chairperson: That was a particular concern for the Committee, and you have clarified the situation. However, if the chief education welfare officer told the Audit Office that, it has, in my opinion, been misled.

Mr Rogers: Alex, I have one more question for you. I cannot believe that you get referrals in late June.

Ms Barr: Yes. It is an absolute nonsense; we get referrals on 30 June some years. It seems as if schools suddenly realise that there are children who have not been attending, and they come to us on 30 June and say that they have missed 20 or 30 days. We ask them what they want us to do; it is the end of the school term. We would make sure that we pick them up in September, if they are still causing difficulties.

Mr Rogers: Related to that; does it only kick onto your radar when it drops to 85% attendance?

Ms Barr: We would usually have picked up those cases earlier in the year, at the half-termly audits. At that point, they may well have not have been below the 85%; they may have been up at 90% or something like that, but the school gets into panic mode coming up to the end of the year.

Mr Rogers: It is a very low level. You are taking 15 days absence in the first 100. By my count, even were they to be there for the next 90 days, the best that they could make would be 91% or 92%. It also establishes really bad practice, as well. It is near enough a day-a-week off.

Ms Barr: If the school has particular concerns about a young person, we will take it earlier. If there are reasons for the absence, we will not. It can sometimes be ambiguous. An example might be a case where the school said that it was concerned because a young child has been absent a lot but has put much of it down to illnesses. The school is just not satisfied with the parental response to that. We do not let it go and say, "Oh, it's an illness". We can ask the community paediatrician to investigate. Also, sometimes you will get young people who suffer from asthma or something like that, in which case we can advise the parent or the community paediatrician about it to see whether they can look at an asthma management programme for them. So, a number of things can be done if it is claimed to be repeat illness.

Mr Rogers: I just want to look at the management admissions systems. As you said, Clare, we have had C2k since 2000, so the attendance model has been there for 14 years. The 2004 report stated:

"More effective use of data is fundamental to combat poor attendance".

First, what review of that attendance module has been done to see how, working along with the Education Welfare Service, it can address this non-attendance issue? Has any review been done, even through asking schools how useful it is?

Dr Mangan: C2k is in regular contact with schools in relation to the use of the system as a whole. The data reports that we are getting about C2k have also enabled us to be much more specific about the nature of the absences and the profile across year groups. That should inform us as we move

forward. In reality, the totality of attendance is, on average, around 95%. If you consider the difference between the 2004 situation and now, there has been a marginal improvement in 10 years.

We need to factor in what percentage of absences are real illness, which is probably around 3%, and what the variance is. That 2% or so is what we really need to focus on to deal with children who perhaps are not ill and do not go to school. I am really saying that the data sets that we now have enable us to have a much more specific focus on the subset of absences that we need to focus on more.

Mrs Gillan: As Clare was saying there, since reporting became mandatory, the Department has regularly reviewed how it operates. The Department has reissued its guidance on exactly the categorisation and the codes that have to be used to allow a better analysis. So, we have fine-tuned the system as we have gone along.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. Secondly, in many of our schools, a child's absence triggers a text message. How widespread is that?

Dr Mangan: It is becoming more widespread. Schools are using text messaging, not just in relation to absence from school but, more specifically, absence from periods of the school day. In other words, by the time the young person gets home, the parent has got the text message that the pupil was not there for double biology in the afternoon. So, some schools are using text messaging to good and, may I say, intelligent effect. Increasingly more schools are using text messaging generally, whether for attendance or other contact with parents.

Mr Rogers: Is that good practice being disseminated?

Dr Mangan: It is, and we are encouraging that because we see it as effective. The message is not seen as being draconian. It is not a sanction. It is about sharing up-to-date information between school and parent in relation to the child's attendance or non-attendance, not necessarily for all of the school day but for part of it.

Mr Rogers: You mentioned remote access for the EWOs earlier. Surely we do not need pilots for that. We have virtual learning communities whereby children and teachers can access their C2k stuff from home. Can we not just roll that straight out?

Dr Mangan: No, we cannot. I have explored that option. It can be done, and it will be done, but there are technical issues around it, to do with not only ownership but access. It is achievable but requires a little bit more work, particularly as we now have a transformed C2k system that is different from the network that was in place 10 years ago.

Mr Copeland: I want to make a couple of small points. We have already established that there is a linkage between socio-economic group income and non-attendance at school. The cut-off for this was 2011-12. That leaves us 2013-14, during which the income of the poorest 10% of families in the Province declined by £1,000. Is it likely that that will be reflected in your figures? More importantly, the most seriously affected demographic, should welfare reform be implemented in its current form, will be low-paid working families with children who, presumably, attend school. I wrote to every government Minister asking for their assessment of the impact should welfare reform be implemented in its current form. It is widely accepted that between £450 million and £750 million will be taken out of the Northern Ireland economy through a reduction or realignment of benefits. If we are saying that children's attendance at school is affected by income, and we have a one-year period where the 10% who are worst off have experienced a £1,000 decrease and there will be another £750 million decrease, it seems to me that that cannot but have an effect. Have you gathered any predictive, as opposed to historical, statistics to assess the nature of the problem that we could be facing? Do we have any figures on the cost, which could maybe be offset by not doing bits of welfare reform?

Mr Sweeney: The short answer is that I do not have that sort of analysis. We are straying into the complexities of the social policy implications of welfare reform. From a Department of Education point of view, I hope that we have been able to demonstrate this afternoon that we are ensuring that the resources that we have available to us are properly targeted, particularly towards the areas of greatest need. We talked about straplines earlier. Poverty should never be used as an excuse, and that is at the heart of what we are trying to do in education. It is about valuing education.

Mr Copeland: I fully understand. However, is it an excuse or is it just an accident that a very large number of children who come from socially and financially deprived backgrounds happened not go to school? That demographic absolutely needs to go to school.

Mr Sweeney: I completely understand the dynamic of that, but communities are getting terrific results in really challenging circumstances. I take my hat off to them. I believe that the dynamic at play is a community that values education. We need to put more effort into fostering that kind of culture. As Caroline said earlier, the Minister has put significant resources into the public campaign about valuing education and about grandparents and parents engaging with their children. As we look to the horizons, there is no doubt that the socio-economic conditions within which we all operate are challenging and, with austerity, are likely to continue to be challenging. However, be assured that the Department will do its level best to target resources where it can. We are not acquiescing that poor educational achievement is an inevitable outcome of poverty, because we know —

Mr Copeland: Historically, that is what the statistics indicate, is it not?

Mr Sweeney: The greatest empowerment tool out of poverty is investing in education. That is crucial. That needs a partnership between the Assembly, the Department, the board, communities and parents. Given the challenges that we are confronting, of all of the social policy interventions that we could focus on, investing in and valuing education can yield very good policy outcomes.

Mr Copeland: Just one last point. We have five separate types of education available, broadly speaking; controlled, maintained, faith-based and the rest of them. Do you have responsibility for all of them?

Mr Sweeney: Yes.

Mr Copeland: OK, that is fine.

Mr Sweeney: There was not a catch in that question, was there?

Mr Copeland: No. What I am basically asking, I suppose, is that, given that the ethos is different in different types of school, is there any ethos that gives a better outcome in terms of actually getting kids to understand that going to school does not restrict your freedom but actually gives you freedom?

Mr Sweeney: That is where we started today. It is about the leadership in the local community valuing education and getting that joined-up approach right from nurturing and Sure Start through to primary and post-primary. You have seen the range of interventions that are possible.

Mr Copeland: As I said, I have quite personal reasons for asking, because my daughter works with NEETs, which are the consequence that arise from this. Yet another one, at 17 years of age, tried to take his own life last night. That is nine since the beginning of December, not just there. That is the real price. Although, in many cases, that stops one type of expenditure, the ongoing costs are absolutely colossal. In my experience, I have employed — most of the guys here would know the people who I employ — people who managed to get through school without reading and writing. They are not stupid, and they do not deserve to be written off. They are a resource that we do not dig our mines deep enough to discover. That is my own opinion.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, guys, for today. I suppose we have been around the house and back again. I just have a couple of points. I will try to keep them close to the sharing of good practice module that I have looked at. I definitely empathise with the struggle to tackle it effectively. I think that the figure is that 9% of learning is actually done in the classroom between the ages of four and 16. It is very hard for a Department of Education, which deals with basically autonomous schools as well, to be able to implement something top-down that, in effect, is a magic bullet. I certainly empathise with that.

However, I think we are starting to make headway. I see that the Minister today launched the Play Together, Learn Together initiative in Galliagh in Derry. Those are the sorts of things that we may not see the results of for a generation, but it is where we need to start. It is important that we embed that social policy within the wider education framework. With that in mind, is the Department working alongside the Department of Health, the Department of Justice and DSD to generate a wider societal approach to absenteeism? I certainly think it is necessary. I think there is only so much that the Department of Education and a school can do. The legal obligation, of course, rests with the parents,

it is not even with the schools. Is there something that we need to look at there? Maybe there is something more that we could look at to give strength to the schools or the Department to enable them to tackle the issue.

I should say from the outset that I want to thank my colleagues across the way for making a better case for ESA today than I or the Minister have ever made before. I will just put that on record anyway. Will we start with those few points before we move on?

Mrs Gillan: I will make a few comments from a departmental engagement perspective. A lot of DSD's neighbourhood renewal stuff does link into educational attainment already. Our officials engage with DSD when we are assessing and evaluating projects on the ground to make sure that the educational outcomes are robust. There is definitely always more that we can do.

I have had an early conversation with officials in the Department of Justice. I believe that they are embarking on a youth justice element, preventing youth getting into criminal behaviour. They are very keen to speak to us and they can certainly see the linkages that we need to look at, because their stats show, as Mr Copeland said, that a lot of the kids getting into crime have low educational experiences, are not going to school and are getting into trouble. So, we are already building the cross-departmental links there.

There is also the nurture work that is going on through Delivering Social Change, on which we work closely with DSD. That is the early intervention work for P1 and P2 children who have emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. They are taken out of their mainstream classes for, perhaps, up to two terms and are put into a really good nurturing environment. That approach is also being rolled out in schools that have a nurture room. We got stats recently from a school — I will not name it — that has one of the 20 new nurture units, and, even since November, the attendance levels of children in those units have gone up by 5% and 6%, so it shows what can be done when there is joined-up working. As we said before, we are developing the cross-departmental element and engaging with officials.

Mr Hazzard: You alluded to measuring these initiatives. Is it possible yet to see what is happening with these initiatives such as Valuing Education or Play Together, Learn Together? Is there a cohort now so that we can start to see whether these are working?

Mrs Gillan: I can speak more closely about the nurture work. We are about to embark on an evaluation. We have to evaluate the current units in order to dictate future policy; we ask whether it works and what is the best thing about it. We cannot just simply evaluate the units that have just been set up; they are part of it, but we need some historical data. A number of schools have had units in place, either self-funded or through extended schools, for quite a period of time. We are using data from those schools plus the schools that had been funded through DSD neighbourhood renewal and commissioning research there to look at the outcomes, not only short-term but longer term in the pupils' careers. Nurture has the benefit of following a Boxall profile, so there is a lot of good data there. I know that DSD recently did an evaluation of neighbourhood renewal. We in the Department are obliged, as you know in the PAC, whenever we do a strategy or an initiative, to evaluate it to prove that it has been effective and is value for money.

Mr Hazzard: Obviously, with the impending reform of the common funding formula, some of these schools in the areas we have mentioned today are going to receive a substantial increase in the money available to them. I know that the Sutton Trust has done a lot of work to provide a suite of good practice measures that schools can pick from. Will the Department work closely with schools to say to them, perhaps, that they have a particular problem with absenteeism, which certainly feeds into low attainment levels, and present them with that suite of measures?

Mrs Gillan: That is right. We mentioned the McClure Watters report earlier. One of its recommendations was that not only should we be networking and providing guidance but that even the guidance that comes out has to allow schools to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of their interventions. We will definitely build that in as we move forward.

Mr Hazzard: I presume, of course, that accountability is built into that so that, if the attendance numbers are not going up in schools, pressure will be applied to ask them what is going on. Perhaps that is where the DI comes in, too.

Mrs Gillan: Yes.

Mr Hazzard: OK. I want to touch briefly on the area learning communities and their role in sharing good practice on attendance.

Mr Sweeney: As I said earlier, I met the 30 area learning communities — all post-primary, obviously — and they have a whole range of subgroups that are sharing good practice. I have to be honest and say we were largely focusing on educational attainment and leadership, which were the two core themes. I was left with a very strong impression that very good informal sharing of good practice is taking place. If I could put the clock back now, with the benefit of the report and the discussion we have had this afternoon, I would say that we need to be more explicit about attendance. Although we have been relentless about attainment, we need to be more overt, as Clare said, about attendance, and we need to hold ourselves to account specifically on that.

To cut a long story short, as we develop the roll-out of good practice, the area learning communities in the post-primary sector have a really good platform that we can exploit for that purpose.

Mr Hazzard: I am really glad to hear you say that about being explicit, because there is so much more to school than attainment. You have to be there, of course, to get it. That is certainly positive.

Is any work being done on international best practice around attendance? I have no doubt that it works best in societies where the effects of poverty and social deprivation do not have the same sort of effect on their system that we have here. Recently, I looked at some of the social missions involved in Venezuela, and they seem to have had a massive impact, not just on the effects of poverty but on attendance in schools. They have certainly hinged around opening up schools to the community in the evening and getting parents, grandparents and families involved in education at night. Therefore, in the morning, the mother or the father knows the value of education and makes sure that the child goes out to school.

Mrs Gillan: When we commissioned the McClure Watters report, the first major section reviewed good practice elsewhere. Obviously, it looked at England, Scotland, Wales and the South, but it also went further afield and considered New Zealand, Canada and a number of other education systems similar to ours. Therefore, we have that good data. McClure Watters collated the best of good practice elsewhere and the good practice going on in the schools, and its final report was very much a summary of what exactly works across the world. However, we can certainly follow up on what is happening elsewhere.

The Chairperson: There are no other questions from members. Thank you, Mr Sweeney and your team, for coming. It has been very helpful. I am sure that you will take away the comments that were made by members. We talked a lot about the sharing of good practice, but we still ended up with this report, and that speaks for itself.

In your opening remarks, you talked about educational achievement, and there was a particular focus on that. In some ways, absenteeism has been allowed to slip. Both are inextricably linked, so we cannot take our eye off the ball on either. There has to be work done. Today's session indicates that there has been a marginal improvement in attendance rates since the last Audit Office report in 2004. However, there is room for improvement, and there are many challenges ahead for you and your Department in learning from that. Thank you for the contribution that you have all made. We will consider the evidence and issue a report in due course. I know that there is some outstanding information that we require from you. The Committee Clerk will work with you to get that information.

We look forward to seeing further improvements in this area. Thank you for attending today.

Mr Sweeney: On behalf of my colleagues, I thank you and the members for the courtesy that you have shown us this afternoon.

The Chairperson: Kieran, do you want to make any comments on today's session?

Mr Kieran Donnelly (Comptroller and Auditor General): Yes. I suppose I am quite heartened by some of Paul's comments, mainly around being explicit on absenteeism and the need for accountability. What struck me, when listening to the evidence, was the broad range of policy options that there are to deal with the problem. However, to help to keep the focus on the issue, it is important to dwell on the 20,000 children who missed more than six weeks a year, and that has been masked by the average figures. The proof will be in the pudding as to how that headline figure moves over the next number of years. That is the main comment that I wanted to make.

The Chairperson: Thank you. We have Mike Brennan with us today in place of Fiona Hamill. You are very welcome, Mike.

Mr Hazzard: Kieran, I know that we made the comparison today with England. How do you think our figures rank in Europe? Would that be easy to extrapolate?

Mr Donnelly: We have not looked at that explicitly in this report, but it is something that we can come back to. I defer to the team on access to information over and above that in the report. We have not gone beyond these islands on this particular data set.

The Chairperson: If members have no other questions for Kieran, we will move on. Mike, do you want to make any comments on what you have heard?

Mr Mike Brennan (Acting Treasury Officer of Accounts): Not really, Chair. However, I would just say that there were a couple of action points in relation to additional information, so we will liaise with the Department to make sure that that is fed through to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Thank you. That ends the evidence session on pupil attendance. I thank everyone involved.