



Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Developing the Skills for Northern
Ireland's Future: Department of Education;
Department of Finance; Northern Ireland
Audit Office

5 December 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)
Ms Cheryl Brownlee (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Colin Crawford
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Ms Diane Forsythe
Mr Colm Gildernew

Witnesses:

Mr Ronnie Armour	Department of Education
Mrs Linsey Farrell	Department of Education
Ms Karen McCullough	Department of Education
Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I welcome, on this very wet Thursday, from the Department of Education: Mr Ronnie Armour, interim accounting officer; and Linsey Farrell, deputy secretary for education policy and children's services; and Karen McCullough, director of qualifications, 14-19 strategy and youth work policy. I also extend our appreciation and warm welcome to Dorinnia Carville, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and her team from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO); and, from the Department of Finance, Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts, and Julie Sewell.

Ronnie, you and your colleagues are welcome to the PAC. We thank you for taking the time to meet us. We wish you well in your new interim position. Whilst recognising that, we will not go any easier on you, Ronnie. I cannot make any apologies for that. Congratulations on your appointment. You will be kept right and on the right path at all times, I am sure.

We have a number of questions to ask you on a number of themes: implementation of the 14-19 framework and cross-departmental working; careers and the prioritisation of actions to deliver the framework; collaboration and duplication; and the curriculum and qualifications. There is a wide range of areas. To make the best use of our time, please keep your answers brief and to the point. We like blunt answers. If we interject to ask you to get to the point, do not take it personally — it is just that we are tight for time and we like to get the questions under way. Members will be instructed to do that. You may make some brief opening remarks.

Mr Ronnie Armour (Department of Education): Chair, I thank you and the Committee for inviting us to engage with you on this subject and for the opportunity to be here. I was appointed acting

permanent secretary just this week, so I will keep my answers brief. As I begin to build my knowledge of my new responsibilities, including those that we are discussing today, I am grateful to be accompanied by my two colleagues, both of whom have been working closely with DFE colleagues to implement the 'Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training: a Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision' — or the 14-19 framework, as we refer to it.

In the recent session with the Committee, our colleagues in the Department for the Economy welcomed the NIAO report that sets out the importance of the skills agenda for individuals, employers and the economy. We share that view. The Audit Office report notes that while DFE leads on skills policy, the effective development of skills is dependent on a collaborative and coherent approach across government and other key stakeholders. One such area in which collaboration is required, as you indicated, centres on the provision of education for the 14-19 age group.

It is fair to say that, when the framework was published in June 2022, it, along with the associated action plan, was received positively. Since then, as the Audit Office report highlights, we have struggled to adequately resource implementation. Consequently, progress in delivery has been more limited than we, or our DFE colleagues, would have liked. Recognising that that was an issue, the joint senior responsible officers (SROs) commissioned a gateway review to help identify the main challenges and to focus on what actions were required to address the difficulties that we faced.

The gate 0 review was completed in January of this year, when it concluded:

"the programme has struggled to make an effective transition from framework development to implementation",

and, in doing so, identified several significant issues relating to governance, programme management and duplication. The report provided a focus for urgent improvement. While there is still work to be done, improvements have been delivered. That was recognised in the subsequent gateway review that was held in August of this year, when we moved the programme from red to amber, which means that, while the programme is feasible, significant issues still need to be addressed. We are addressing those issues.

On the actions that we have taken, following the review, the two Departments worked closely with the wider stakeholder network to devise new governance arrangements that would support delivery of the work. In addition, in conjunction with our stakeholders, we agreed to establish new groups to take forward work on careers, curriculum, qualifications and post-16 provision. Those groups are working on delivery plans to put to the Ministers for approval.

Looking forward, we plan to establish a cross-departmental ministerial group so that Ministers Givan and Murphy can meet to discuss the areas of mutual interest and have direct oversight of the progress being made on the delivery plans by the thematic groups. We recognise the need to ensure that we tap into the extensive knowledge and expertise of our partners in the wider stakeholder network. To achieve that, we plan to establish an expert advisory panel to support us in determining how policy can be best delivered.

More generally, the skills strategy sets out ambitious targets in respect of the qualification levels of our working-age population. Effecting that improvement requires increased participation in adult learning and new workers who enter the labour market to have the qualification levels that can make a positive contribution to those targets. We know from our data — this was acknowledged in an OECD skills report — that an increasing number of young people are leaving school with level 2 and level 3 qualifications. The vast majority of school-leavers continue in education or training to further enhance their level of study. However, we accept that there is no room for complacency. We need to continue to address the variation in outcomes across the cohort of school-leavers. We have a number of policies and interventions in place to support learners and tackle educational underachievement and low attainment, which I will mention briefly.

First, in the draft Programme for Government, the Executive have prioritised:

"Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs".

The Department is developing a SEN reform agenda and a delivery plan that will set out the programme of transformational change that is required over the next five years across the policy and operational delivery landscapes.

Secondly, in the Minister's recent statement to the Assembly, he outlined his response to the independent review of education. In doing so, he noted that his:

"priority is a sustained, evidence-based approach to the improvement of the education system that is focused on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage." — [Official Report (Hansard), 21 October 2024, p11, col 1].

Reforming each of those areas will be underpinned by investment in high-quality professional development of our workforce. In the new year, the Minister will publish a clear and cohesive strategy for education that sets out the detail of his plans for educational transformation.

Finally, I will say something about collaboration. We recognise that the multifaceted challenges outlined in the Audit Office report on the skills strategy cannot be tackled in silos. We need to work and are working collaboratively with DFE across a range of policy issues. In respect of the skills agenda, that includes engaging with the Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) and its subgroups and close working on implementation of the 14-19 framework.

As I consider that work, I do not underestimate the challenges that we face in the context of the limited resources that are available to us. As Ian Snowden indicated in his opening remarks to the Committee, we all face the challenge of delivering ambitious agendas with finite resources. For my part, I assure the Committee that we will work with our DFE colleagues to prioritise the resources that are needed to achieve the greatest impact. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you very much, Ronnie, for keeping your opening remarks succinct and covering the various areas of interest today.

You implied that the implementation problems are a result of a lack of resources, which is fair enough. However, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report said that the problems were numerous. In fact, it stated:

"In January 2024, officials from DfE and DE commissioned a Gateway review to help identify the main challenges ...

- ineffective governance;*
- unclear objectives;*
- misalignment between the programme and stakeholder objectives;*
- duplication of effort ...*
- limited delivery management; and*
- no benefits management."*

There is quite a wide range of challenges there. You specifically focused on resources, but there are other issues that were clearly pointed out by the Audit Office report.

Mr Armour: Chair, I absolutely agree with that. I am not shying away from the list that the Audit Office highlighted, and, in fact, I agree with that. I am simply saying that resource is a context within which we are working, but that is not to take away from the issues that were raised. We, as a Department, along with DFE colleagues, recognised that there was a significant problem here, and that is part of the reason why we instigated the gateway review. The gateway review probably did not tell us anything that we did not already know, but I think that it was an important contribution to help us shape the way forward. We certainly have been working to try to make improvements and get the programme on track. It is encouraging that it is now at an amber rather than a red status, but that is not to take away from the fact that there is a huge amount of work still to do. I absolutely accept the issues that the Audit Office raised. Resource is a challenge for us in a number of areas.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): One of the assessments is that the:

"programme may need re-baselining or its viability reassessing".

Do you agree with that?

Mr Armour: I will certainly want to look at that now that I am in the role. It is encouraging that progress has been made. The gateway review in August was encouraging. However, I am open to looking to see what more can be done or needs to be done.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Ronnie, who reassessed it and changed the alert from red to amber?

Mr Armour: That was undertaken, as I understand it, by the gateway team.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Within the Department?

Mrs Linsey Farrell (Department of Education): It is an independent team.

Mr Armour: It is an independent team.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I was just making sure that you are not marking your own homework.

Mr Armour: No, we are not marking our own homework. It is encouraging that an independent group looked at it and saw the progress that we were making.

Mrs Farrell: It was the same gateway team that had undertaken the initial gateway review. It came back to do that further assessment.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): While I am on the gateway review, I will stick with it. What degree of cooperation has there been between Departments at any level since the framework was jointly produced?

Mr Armour: We have sought to work closely with DFE. A number of mechanisms are in place, and Linsey might want to take you through those. I do not think that there is any lack of willingness or ambition on the part of the two Departments to work together, but it is a challenging area.

Mrs Farrell: There is collaboration on a number of levels, Chair. There is a real will for joint commitment to the 14-19 framework. Moira Doherty and I are the joint SROs of the programme, and we have a positive working relationship. That is translated to our teams, which is reflected in the new delivery model that has been established in response to the gateway review recommendations with the setting up of the three thematic groups that Ronnie referred to in his opening statement. Those groups are entirely integrated, comprising DE and DFE staff. Beyond the 14-19 framework, there is closer and more collaborative working between DE and DFE on a number of issues: skills; the 14-19 agenda; the careers work being taken forward in that context; the whole area of initial teacher education, where there is a clear read across; and the special educational needs agenda, where our closer cooperation is reflected in the end-to-end review of SEN.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Was the programme board the only level of cooperation that was envisaged initially?

Mrs Farrell: A governance arrangement was envisioned at the time that the initial framework and action plan were produced. When Moira and I looked at it in January, there had been the passage of time and a lot of changes in the external environment. For example, in the interim period, there had been the recommendations from the independent review of education and other reports, and other things had happened. With that, there was a need for us to take stock, and part of that was to look at the governance arrangements. There had been the intention to have a programme board that would oversee delivery of the programme in its entirety. On reflection, including on the gateway review recommendations, it has become clear that there is a need to look at that and to reset the programme infrastructure and how we can ensure that stakeholder views continue to be taken on board in implementation. The complexity of those issues and how difficult a task it was to come to agreement on a framework and action plan cannot be overestimated. There is a huge number of stakeholders from the FE sector and across education. In responding to the gateway recommendations, we have been mindful of how we can ensure that the participatory design approach is built into everything that we do as we move to implementation.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. That is helpful. I will just touch on implementation of the framework and action plan. You touched on it, Ronnie and Linsey. Will you say in a direct way why there has been a failure to implement the action plan and deliver better outcomes for young people?

Mr Armour: In part, Chair, it is because we have not resourced that work in the way that we should have or would have liked to. That is my initial comment. Linsey has been much closer to it as it has developed and may also want to comment.

Mrs Farrell: It is precisely that. When the 14-19 framework and action plan were agreed, they did not come with a specific budget and resources to deliver them. That having been said, and accepting the findings of the Audit Office report, we know, as Ronnie acknowledged in his opening statement, that there is much more to do. It is also important to reflect that, where we have been able to move forward on actions in the 14-19 framework, we have done so. That might not have been done under the umbrella of the 14-19 framework, but we have taken the time in DE to look across the range of reports. For example, if you look at the 'A Fair Start' report and action plan alongside the 14-19 framework, you will see that common themes run through them, such as the entitlement framework; the need for a refined, stand-alone sixth form policy; and the special educational needs curriculum. We have taken the time to look at those consistencies and have tried to move things forward where we can, but it is important to say that that has been in the context of extremely limited resource and many competing priorities.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I appreciate that answer. I have no doubt that the intentions are there and that they are well made, but the real question is this: how many of those intentions have become outcomes? They are referenced in the various documents, as you said, but, although we constantly talk about the issues, there does not seem to be any deliverable outcome.

Ms Karen McCullough (Department of Education): Lots of work is under way, as Linsey and Ronnie said. On careers, which I lead on for DE, I have been working closely with DFE colleagues such as the director and head of the Careers Service to progress that work. We will present a joint forward work programme to the Ministers in a couple of weeks — hopefully, before Christmas. That kind of work has been going on. The structure includes the SROs and the 14-19 implementation team that oversees the work. The themed groups are really helpful in that they bring us together and give us the opportunity to make sure that each of us is aware of what is what is going on and of the work that is progressing. They provide opportunities to work more collaboratively. Somebody from the implementation team attends each of the three groups, which means we can get consistency across the key themed areas. Having the groups means knowing where we need to look and making sure that, if there are opportunities to engage with stakeholders, we do so in an effective way, picking up on all the issues rather than doing it all separately and in a disjointed way. That is what the groups have brought to the work.

Mr Armour: An honest answer to your question, Chair, is that there has not been as much progress as we would like and that we have not delivered as many outcomes as we would want. Having said that, I think that it is right and helpful that there is now a work programme that will go to the Ministers. I certainly want, along with Linsey and Karen, to look at the resource issue.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Briefly, before I move on, I hear in a lot of our evidence sessions that work is ongoing. Are there any time frames that measure progress so that we can see whether we are moving forward at all, or are we just —

Ms McCullough: That will be in the forward work programmes from each of the groups. Take careers, for example. There are recommendations in the 14-19 framework, the 'A Fair Start' report, the independent review of careers guidance and the independent review of education. That has provided a real opportunity. We have been working more closely and saying, "These are not separate pieces. We need to work in a more joined-up way across all of them". In the 14-19 framework, the focus and emphasis is on putting the young person at the centre. What are we going to do for those young people, and what are DFE and the Careers Service going to do for those young people? What supports do they need? That way of working is coming in.

Quite a lot of the recommendations in the 14-19 framework are big, fundamental reform pieces around qualifications and curriculum. We have started on the journey of qualifications reform. We have commissioned work that is going to inform the direction of travel and provide advice to a Minister. However, from starting that to actually putting new qualifications in place can take eight years. That is what we are going to do across those groups: we will set all that out.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Briefly, before I let Cheryl in, Colm Gildernew wants to ask a supplementary question.

It is sometimes difficult to hear in this room because of its size, so I ask the panel to elevate your voices as much as possible, just to help everybody pick you up.

Mr Gildernew: I am reflecting on what you said about creating opportunities to work closer together. The issues have existed for a long time, and, to be honest, the opportunities to cooperate have always been there. Is it time that we start to mandate that, rather than just create opportunities for it? Is that the only way that we are going to get a real sea change?

Mr Armour: There is a commitment to the sea change that you are talking about. There is an opportunity. We want to try to give priority to it.

Ms McCullough: There is a mandate: the Children's Services Co-operation Act requires it.

Mr Gildernew: Is that working?

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Uh-uh.

Mr Armour: It is early days.

Ms McCullough: Yes. The challenge in these things is always funding. That is the biggest issue.

Mrs Farrell: There are fundamental differences between the two systems for 14-19. We are essentially talking about an ecosystem for young people aged 14 to 19 and their pathways. The funding models are different. How schools are funded is different to how further education colleges are funded. The language that is used is different: we talk about "cross-curricular skills"; DFE talks about "transversal skills". There are different modes and methods of assessment. There are different narratives. The purpose of our curriculum is not solely to service the needs of the economy — it goes beyond that — but, for DFE and the further education sector, that is the core focus. We are not using that as an excuse not to work together, because we are absolutely committed to that collaboration, but it is important to understand the complexity of the landscape and that working together, on its own, is not enough without addressing some of those fundamental issues that we need to work through together.

The bit that is more difficult to measure, which we see, is the difference that this is making to the quality of the debate and conversations. There was a time when skills discussions, for example, were only held in the realms of Economy, when, actually, it is important that those are had in Education, because that is where the skills pipeline starts — it starts in nursery school. Those conversations are now being had. We have them together, collectively. We are talking much more to business and industry than happened previously. I accept that those things are more difficult to measure and probably less visible, but they are certainly what we can point to as a result of having this framework in place. There is still much more that we can do.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you so much for your answers so far. I want to touch on special educational needs and disabilities. You are obviously well aware of it and I know that the Department is doing a lot of work in that regard. I want to keep on that thread of collaborative working. In what way is your collaborative work ongoing with the Department for the Economy on the projection of SEND, and how is it being monitored?

Mrs Farrell: Thank you, Cheryl, for the question. As you will be aware, we have just completed the end-to-end review of special educational needs, and there is active consideration of the SEN reform agenda and associated delivery plan. One of the work streams in the end-to-end review was specifically around transitions for young people with special educational needs beyond the age of 19. Of all the work streams, that was the one that was taken forward most collaboratively. I have to say that the collaboration and support from colleagues in the Department for the Economy was second to none. We held a number of workshops and engagements with parents and with other key stakeholders. Those were all run jointly with DFE colleagues. Separately, they have been using that information and engagement to inform their thinking on resourcing in their Department — I am sure that they have talked about that — and their approach to how they will deal with that, going forward. We have also been involved in the development of the SEN reform agenda and delivery plan, talking to DFE colleagues about potential pilots and initiatives that could be taken forward on which we could work together.

We have also been doing a lot of work in the data analysis space, because we are conscious that economic inactivity is a significant issue in Northern Ireland. As a cohort, young people with special educational needs deserve and have the right to appropriate pathways into employment and training, and, as a society, we will all benefit from that. We have, therefore, been engaging with the Department for the Economy and local government on how we can get better at modelling for the future, looking at the numbers coming through our schools and their statementing levels etc, and at what that will mean for economic inactivity in the future.

I can absolutely say, however, that there is true collaborative working with the Department for the Economy in that area.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you. That is critical, particularly the data piece, so that nothing will be a shock, in five or 10 years, when children — adults, at that stage — want to go into employment or further education or into support if they cannot do that. It is critical that that collaboration continues.

Have you seen any movement? Could you provide an example of best practice by the Department in that regard?

Mrs Farrell: On transitions, specifically?

Ms Brownlee: Yes.

Mrs Farrell: We have not taken anything forward yet, but we have built a lot of thinking into developing proposals for the SEN reform agenda. From visiting a number of special schools, we can say that the issue is very important to them, as you would imagine that it would be. We have met parents who are anxious about what will happen to their young people once they leave that special school. Many of those parents have put forward ideas for possible approaches to managing that transition, suggesting what the pathways might look like and opportunities for better partnerships between special schools, local government and the voluntary and community sector. Those are the types of ideas that we have been exploring and that will be considered further by the Minister before making any announcement.

Ms Brownlee: Have you had any conversations with industry or business about how their work with SEN children might look, moving forward? Is there a specific timeline? You mentioned the SEN reform agenda over the next five years, but do you know exactly what is going to happen with those benchmarks and when? Do parents know?

Mrs Farrell: We want to get to the point where we have a very clear plan of what will happen in years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, while recognising that some issues may take longer than five years to address if we are to achieve true transformation. That, ultimately, is where we want to get to. Following a decision by the Minister, some of the next steps that we take will involve very active concentration on communication and engagement with a range of stakeholders, primarily children and their parents.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Linsey, I want to touch on something before letting Pádraig in. You gave a good analysis of the challenges that are faced by SEN children. I understand that: we all hear about those challenges every day of the week. There is a lot of discussion about ideas, but what is actually happening to solve the problem?

Mrs Farrell: That is what will be in the SEN reform agenda and action plan. A range of issues around achieving transformation will be set out in that, covering themes such as improving early identification of need and early response to that need; looking at how to transform the statementing process; and looking at pathways — I talked about that — and at the transitions for children and young people with SEN. At the most basic level, the reform agenda and action plan absolutely has to deal with the placements issue. We can summarise it by saying that it will be about providing the right support, at the right time, in the right place and from the right people. There will be a big piece in it around building the confidence and capability of the workforce, because what is clear is that the needs and the complexity of those needs across the system are something that teachers and school leaders are saying that they are struggling with and that they have not been given the requisite support to help to meet those needs. Those will be the themes and the areas for action.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): This is an important question because transition in this place is slow — snail-paced, in fact — and the consequences are profound for those directly affected: what is the time frame?

Mrs Farrell: The SEN reform agenda and action plan are with the Minister. He has made it clear publicly that he wants to say something very soon on the direction of travel of that. It is important to say that to achieve full transformation will require additional investment in education. That is not to say that we stand still and do nothing, because we also need to look at how we are configuring the investment that we currently have in our system to support children and young people who have special educational needs. However, the Minister will certainly be saying something soon about the plan, and that will be clear and specific about what will be delivered.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): How long has that been with the Minister?

Mrs Farrell: Not long.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK.

Mrs Farrell: The end-to-end review has only just concluded, and the Minister has placed significant priority on bringing that to a conclusion. When it was initiated in spring last year, it had an 18-month timeline. You will be aware that, during that time, we had the issue of SEN placements, so priority was given and resource diverted to deal with that emerging crisis over the summer and up to September. That should have meant that the end-to-end review rolled on longer, but the Minister placed a particular emphasis on bringing that to a conclusion.

Mr Armour: Officials are meeting the Minister next week to talk about the paper that Linsey referred to. I do not think that any of us underestimate the challenge that lies ahead in dealing with this issue. Linsey is right: it will need to be funded, but even if funding was available, it is still hugely complex. However, there is, I think, a determination on the Minister's part, and on our part, to drive forward with that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is an extremely fluid situation in that it is worsening year-on-year, so the challenge of resourcing will intensify.

Mrs Farrell: If we continue doing things the way that we do them.

Mr Armour: And that places a huge strain on the Department's overall budget.

Mrs Farrell: Ultimately, our primary concern in all of this has to be improving outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs. That has been our primary concern in taking forward the end-to-end review. What are those outcomes currently; how can we improve them; how do we improve collaborative working across Departments; and how do we improve the data insights that we can gather from the information that collectively we have across the system?

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): On data insights, does the school IT system have a facility to share data with further and higher education, and, if not, has that facility been built into the planned IT refresh?

Ms McCullough: There is a facility to share between schools. I am not sure what the arrangements are between schools and further education.

Mrs Farrell: We can certainly explore that and get back to you.

Mr Armour: My instinct is that there is not that facility, but we would need to come back to the Committee on that once we have checked.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is obvious that there needs to be. That is probably the best response to that, but that is fine.

Mr Delargy: I had some technical issues at the start. By way of a declaration of interest, I am my party's spokesperson for further and higher education and a participant on a SKILL UP course.

Thank you for your presentation and your answers. I want to touch on your area of prioritisation in the framework and time-bound issues. First, how did you decide which area to prioritise in the framework?

Ms McCullough: In the 14-19 framework?

Mr Delargy: Yes.

Ms McCullough: Three groups are working. We have work ongoing on careers, curriculum and qualifications, and on post 16. Although most of those involve me within the Department, there are different directors in DFE, and we are working alongside them. What we did internally was look at the sequencing of what would need to be done. There were lots of recommendations in there, but some things have to happen in a particular order. We took a look at that. Then, the two Ministers met to discuss the 14-19 framework and prioritise. When we met them, the main area was careers. Our focus has been on that.

As I said, the forward work plan is due with the Ministers this side of Christmas. The way in which we have worked through it is by looking at all the issues that have been raised through all those reviews and feedback from learners, careers teachers and coordinators. We looked at the common themes and then at what we could do. Things are under way on those areas. For example, a common theme that came out was the value of starting careers-related learning at an earlier stage. That came from a few places. We have used Fair Start funding to develop a programme called Primary Futures in primary schools. Another area was around greater consistency in the quality and quantity of careers education. We have been working with the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA). In Preparing for Success, there is a framework that sets out the learning intentions and outcomes for young people. That needs to be refreshed. We have set up a workshop with NISCA to help us work our way through that and refresh the framework. We have also increased awareness of and access to careers information. That is something that young people and careers advisers want. We have been working with colleagues in DFE, particularly in the careers occupational information unit. It has a huge collection of really helpful publications. Those are shared with schools through the C2k network, area learning communities and NISCA members.

We are working our way through them and putting things in place to drive that improvement as we go along, but the priority came from looking at all the reports that have been done in totality rather than individually, and then working out what we could do on each of the strands of work.

Mr Delargy: Does each of the five themes or strands that you chose still stand, or do you think that there needs to be any change?

Ms McCullough: I think that they do still stand. There are those three themed groups, but working across all of it — that is where that programme implementation came across — are things such as communication and shared language. Those have to be picked up in each of the groups in order to avoid duplication and make sure that things are joining up from each of those groups. As I said, I am on all of them, so it is more straightforward for me to do that. Language is a big issue. We use different words to talk about the same thing. We need to sort that out. I think that it is all still in there. It is just because of the way in which it is structured that language is not a separate issue; it cuts across everything. That is where we have tried to make those issues more cross-cutting.

Mr Delargy: I am really interested in how you measure them and keep track of them. Do you use SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound — targets?

Ms McCullough: No. There is a programme of work to be done, and it is more like a "red, amber, green" kind of approach.

Mr Armour: It is a programme management approach.

Ms McCullough: Yes, to show whether we are on track. When the forward work plans come out, that is where you will see the targets and when things will be done and completed.

Mr Delargy: OK, so there will be time-bound actions within those?

Ms McCullough: Yes.

Mr Delargy: OK. On revision and detail, I am interested in the system that you use and how it breaks down. You mentioned the red, amber, green system that you use currently. Do you attach time frames to that? I am still a wee bit confused about when we can actually expect to see the action and delivery on that. I know that you have mentioned that the report is with the Minister, but will each element of that be time-bound? Will each element of delivery be time-bound, and so on?

Mrs Farrell: I think that that will be part of the role of the new delivery model and new oversight structure moving forward, Pádraig. Those thematic groups have been tasked with bringing forward those forward work plans. Part of the next step will be the reporting and oversight around that to make sure that we are able to be accountable around the delivery against those targets and what level of information will then be available around the progress that is being made across those themes. That will be part of the next step in the new delivery model that Moira and I will work through as joint SROs for the programme.

Mr Delargy: I appreciate that, but I go back to the question: will that be time-bound? I am just asking for my own clarity.

Mrs Farrell: I am not entirely clear which part you are referring to.

Mr Delargy: No problem. I mean all the different elements and actions. You said that the programme will be broadly time-bound, but will each action and delivery point be time-bound as well?

Mrs Farrell: Yes. That will be set out in the forward work plans that go to the Minister, Pádraig. A timeline will be attached to each piece of work or action.

Mr Delargy: OK. That is brilliant. Thank you.

Chair, I will come back in later. I have a couple of questions on school attendance, but I know that other members want to come in on these points. I thank the witnesses for their answers so far. I appreciate them.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Just indicate when you need to come in.

Pádraig raised an important point on SMART targets. As you know, they are specific, measurable and time-bound. Do you not think that they are a better mechanism than the one that is currently in place?

Mr Armour: We absolutely do, Chair. That is why we are going to move to that approach.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): When will we do that?

Mr Armour: As Linsey indicated, the delivery plan has gone to the Minister. Once that is approved, we will move forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. It is much more effective in helping people to know whether they have achieved their targets. That is grand.

Mr Crawford: Thanks to the panel members for their time. My question is on the two Departments' most recent joint strategy for careers education and guidance, which covered the five years up to 2020. Was there an evaluation of the strategy? If so, was it found to be successful? How have lessons been taken forward to inform current provision and priorities?

Ms McCullough: Yes, a piece of work was done on the previous strategy. The first piece was done by the two Departments. It looked at whether the actions had been achieved. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reviewed that and gave us feedback on it. It gave us a list of things that we needed to look at, which did not really differ from the things that have come out of other reports. So, yes, those are being taken into account when we develop the forward work programme.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): To follow up on that, did the ETI evaluate any part of the joint strategy for careers education and guidance that ended in 2020? If so, how did it fare?

Ms McCullough: That was the piece of work that the two Departments prepared, which looked at all the actions and how the strategy had fared. The ETI's evaluation of what it sees in schools and everything that it hears from learners aligns with everything else. You realise that the strategy is working for the vast majority of learners but not for everybody. For example, we put questions in the young persons' behaviour and attitudes survey to ask whether they feel that they are in a position to make effective decisions about their careers. Most of them say yes, but a third of them say no, they do not feel as confident as they would like. The ETI did a similar survey and asked the young people how they felt about careers. Around a fifth of them said that they would like more careers education. Those messages were coming through.

Our ambition is to have a system that works for everybody. We looked at best practice and asked, "What does 'good' look like in a careers-related offer in schools?", and that is what we are aiming for. We want to see careers education at the core of it, which is provision that enables learners to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to manage their career development. Then they need careers information, which we talked about, to help inform decisions. They need work-related learning; experiencing the world of work is an important part of it, whether through work experience, visits or inputs from employers. We need opportunities across the curriculum to develop young people's employability skills — literacy, numeracy and teamwork — and, importantly, opportunities for independent, impartial careers advice. That comes through the Careers Service. Each school has a partnership agreement.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): If one third of young people said no, that is not a good result.

Ms McCullough: It is not. We need to improve what we are doing and that is exactly our focus. When we ask young people what they want and what is missing for them, it is quite interesting. They say that they want information on what qualifications they need to progress their career plan, and we have started to make sure that there is a lot more information coming through to them from the careers occupational information unit. They want information on what employers are looking for, help with interview skills and help to find work experience. That is quite a big call on employers to feed into it as well. It would be good to get their input.

Ms Brownlee: You said that children do not feel that they are getting proper education around that. There have been so many advancements in technology, and the way in which children utilise technology now has completely changed from when I was young, which is not that long ago. I look at my daughter who is 13, and everything is on TikTok or Snapchat; it is instant information. Has that come to your door in the sense of the way in which the information is provided? Have you looked at how to change that and make that information more accessible, instant and probably more aligned to what the children are looking for?

Ms McCullough: Yes. The Careers Service in DFE provides that and is very aware of and on top of that. The careers portal that is being developed is a really good underpinning infrastructure to support everything. Information is there, but people sometimes do not know where to find it. If there was an agreed place and people knew where to go, that would help a lot. They are in the discovery phase of that at the moment and are engaging extensively with young people, schools and careers teachers. Hopefully, that will help and make it fit for purpose for young people. Parents play a huge part as well. When we ask in those surveys about who is influencing decisions, parents are high on the list. They need to understand the pathways, what qualifications are available, where they might lead and where the options are for studying those.

Ms Brownlee: How do you ensure that the information is standardised right across Northern Ireland? Some places might do it very well, and some children might have parents who are very engaged and encouraging. Other people do not have those opportunities. How is it standardised so that everybody will receive that information and those opportunities?

Ms McCullough: That is what we are trying to tackle. There are always those people who are very quick to pick up on things and some who do not. One of the things that careers teachers are talking to us about is that they want opportunities to work together. I am sure that being the careers coordinator in a school is sometimes quite a lonely post. They want to work together and to look at things such as work experience and engagement with parents. Some settings do it really well. The area learning communities do careers fairs, where they will have the young people during the day and then invite the parents along in the evening. There is really good practice out there; it is about making sure that it is done more consistently. If we set out in a framework what "good" looks like, what the learning

intentions are and how that might be delivered, working with those careers teachers, that is all aimed at trying to address those issues.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you.

Mr Boylan: Some of my questions have been answered.

Ronnie, I wish you all the best in your new role.

Mr Armour: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr Boylan: Thanks very much for your presentation and your answers so far. I am slightly concerned because we know that resource is an issue, but we still have a job of work to do. We cannot let the pupils down. I will come back to the Chair's point in a minute, but, specifically for our report, I want to ask a question. From listening to some of your answers, it is clear that, besides needing to work across Departments and to get away from the silo mentality, we need other partners, whether that is local authorities or local businesses. I said at the session last week that orientating skills geographically may not be a bad thing to look at. I am not saying that it is the right or wrong thing to do. What are your views on moving forward on that? In the absence of properly resourcing the things that we want to do and the frameworks that we have — we have some good policies and good ideas — where are we with those broader conversations with the partners that we need to bring into the room now? Years ago, we would not have been involved with partners in that way, but we certainly need them in the room now. I would like you to expand on that.

Mr Armour: I could not agree more. You are right in saying that resource is an issue, and you are equally right in saying that we need to prioritise to make sure that we are making the best use of the resources that we have. Part of that absolutely involves drawing in others to work alongside us. Linsey touched on the work that she has been doing to do that. I do not know whether you want to say anything about that, Linsey.

Mrs Farrell: The Skills Council has been hugely helpful with that. It is chaired independently by Kathleen O'Hare. That forum is, for the first time and in a unique way, bringing a range of sectors together. You have business and industry, further and higher education and then us, in Education, around a table having those collective conversations about the ecosystem on the pathways for young people. They are not always easy conversations, and there is not always a meeting of minds, but that is really important because it leads to a maturity of relationship. That has been really helpful for setting a different course and a different narrative and for moving away from all the problems much more to asking where the solutions can be found. They are to be found in having those partnerships and that collaboration across sectors.

We in DE have been trying to reach out and build partnerships with sectors that are beyond education, including with colleagues in DFE and further and higher education. It is important to point to some of the work that we have been doing with the ICT industry and Software NI on the digital skills action plan and setting up our digital skills oversight group while recognising that there is a very particular issue and a particular skills shortage there. However, the pipeline is actually starting in our primary schools and looks at what needs to be done. We have commissioned the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to do some work on bringing forward proposals on the range of actions that need to be taken.

In an example like that, there are fundamental difficulties, such as teacher shortages. We simply cannot compete with the IT industry. Those who leave university with a relevant degree will probably not choose teaching over a much higher-paid career in the IT industry. There are very practical things that we perhaps need to work through to find creative solutions.

Separately, we have been doing a round of engagement with local government and going round all the councils. That has been really important in linking into the labour market partnerships and the more localised approach to skills. We have been trying to connect schools to local businesses and local industries through the labour market partnerships and the area learning communities in order to try to build those connections at school level. I am sure that there is much more that we could do in all that, but those are the partnerships that we have set up so far.

Mr Armour: Just to broaden the point a little bit, Linsey touched on the pressures that there are in finding teaching staff with certain skills. We spent yesterday with colleagues right across the education

sector looking at a workforce planning strategy to try to address some of the very issues that Linsey highlighted. There are serious pressures in a number of areas, in that we are struggling to find teachers to fill posts. We are looking at that separately. It is a challenging area for us.

I am sorry, Karen.

Ms McCullough: I want to pick up on the point that you made about using what we have more effectively. We have groups called area learning communities (ALC) that bring together all the schools and FE colleges in an area to support the delivery of the entitlement framework. They have careers subgroups as well. We are seeing the area learning communities, the labour market partnerships and the Careers Service connecting, and there are some really good examples on the ground of how they are working. The Newry, Mourne and Down labour market partnership has established a schools and industry working group, and it has brought together the coordinators that represent 26 post-primary schools in the area. That showcases successful local businesses to schools, parents and young people in order to encourage a pool of people in a local area. They have facilitated a number of what they call "employment pathway events". Similarly, a subgroup of Causeway Coast and Glens labour market partnership has organised careers conventions with the area learning communities and schools. At the moment, something like 11 of our ALCs are working with the labour market partnerships.

Mr Boylan: OK. Chair, I have another couple of questions.

You may have touched on this, Karen, but no matter what the school, every child should have an opportunity to access proper careers education and guidance. How do we ensure that the person who delivers that guidance is equipped to deliver it and that every child gets proper advice?

Ms McCullough: We are having that conversation with NISCA, which represents careers advisers in schools, because every single review that has been done has pointed to the need for professional development for careers teachers and coordinators in schools. Interestingly, NISCA surveyed its members and found that 40% of them had been in post for only five years and that half of them had been in post for just two years. If you think about the environment at the time that they took up their posts, you will find that there was industrial action and that we were returning from COVID. There is a training need.

However, things are going on. As I said, we have the area learning communities, which have careers subgroups. NISCA and the area learning communities run conferences. They are very proactive in trying to learn, and we are trying to work with them by asking, "How can we help to facilitate that learning? What kind of training should be available?" There has not been investment specifically in that area for a long time.

Mr Boylan: The Chair mentioned the ETI. Does it review the provision of careers education and guidance as part of school inspections or as a separate exercise?

Ms McCullough: It can do both. Inspections have been impacted on for several years now because of the action short of strike, so there has not been the usual inspection activity but there have been district inspector visits. Employability is covered as part of the new inspection model and will be part of the ETI's inspections of schools, colleges and training organisations.

There is also an opportunity to commission professional advice from the ETI. You could look at something more thematically and ask specifically about work experience or something like that.

Mr Boylan: This is my final question, Chair — trust me. Has the ETI found the quality of careers provision to be effective? Where it is found not to be effective, what action is taken?

Ms McCullough: As I said, in the past seven years, it has really been impacted on by the things that I talked about. The figures that we have from prior to that show that it started from a very low base. A few years ago — it was maybe 10 years ago — it found that provision was about 35%, which is where you would want it to be. When there was more of a focus on it, however, we saw it improve. In its report, the ETI said that there was good-quality provision in schools. As I said, however, we unfortunately have not had —.

Mr Boylan: There is a lot of catching up to do.

Ms McCullough: We are just getting the information.

Mr Boylan: We need to roll that out.

Mr Armour: Inspectors are back in schools now, and we want that to continue, but there is a lack of evidence.

Mr Boylan: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I will move on, because we are tight for time. A number of things have arisen, such as the fact that there is a shortage of specialists, which we have known was emerging for over a decade. Unions in particular have pointed that out. I remember the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) raising those concerns, and we are still talking about them now instead of dealing with the problem. The need for professional development of careers teachers has been an issue for many years — longer than I have been alive. We are also still talking about that. You can see why the Committee's work is so outcomes-focused and focused on what is actually being delivered. As opposed to hearing the same, "We are going to do one thing", and, "We want to do another thing", the Committee wants to see what is being done and the time frame that is attached to that. That is why we are being quite direct with some of our questions.

I will hand back to Cheryl.

Ms Brownlee: Sorry, I accidentally stole your question, Cathal. My questions are very simple. When does careers education start, and does it start early enough? Are children making decisions that could restrict their further educational pathways?

Ms McCullough: Are you asking whether the careers advice from the advisers, which means the Careers Service intervention, happens in the education system?

Ms Brownlee: In education, yes

Ms McCullough: Employability is a statutory part of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 4, but there are opportunities in primary school to look at the personal development side of it. That happens where employees and different tradespeople go into schools and give talks. Careers education should start then. All the research and international best practice says that it should start then.

As I say, we used some Fresh Start money to introduce Primary Futures, which is a fascinating piece of research and approach. Young people in P5 and P7 were asked to draw the career that they want, and then they were asked, "Why do you want to do that? How do you know about it? Where did you get your information?". The information that is coming out of that is really interesting. The report that has been done on it will be launched at the end of January.

The young people drew some great pictures. What we saw at that age — I know that they are still quite young — is that there is a significant misalignment between the jobs that the children aspire to and the economic forecasts. For example, we found that 35% of those young children aspire to occupations in culture, media and sport, but only 1% of projected new jobs are in that area. So, we have a misalignment. Another finding was that their aspirations cover only 31% of current employment opportunities. It shows the real importance of getting employers in and involved earlier in order to broaden people's understanding of what is available to them so that they will look wider.

Mrs Farrell: Karen used the word "aspiration". It is about instilling aspiration. We hear consistently, certainly from schools that are in more disadvantaged communities, that the most fundamental issue that they face is that lack of aspiration, so programmes such as Primary Futures are important. Even before they meet anybody from a particular occupation, it is about raising the children's eyes and instilling that sense of aspiration for something that is new and different.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that. A huge piece of work needs to be done on raising aspirations. Will that work be included in the framework?

Ms McCullough: That work was done on a very small amount of money. Last year was the first year of it. We have some more money this year to try to expand it. It was offered to all primary schools, but, with the action short of strike, it was not taken up. However, we are trying to make sure that it is taken

up. Again, it needs the input from employers. They need to go and have those conversations with young people in schools to give them the opportunity to talk about different jobs and what those involve. Schools did a great thing by inviting somebody in, and the children had to guess what job they do. The stereotyping was really interesting.

Ms Brownlee: Is that a voluntary thing for schools? It is not something that they have to do.

Ms McCullough: They do not have to do it.

Ms Brownlee: Do you keep data on the take-up or on why schools cannot do it, what they are struggling with and what the barriers are? Will you look at that?

Ms McCullough: Absolutely. As you say, it is about addressing those barriers. Schools are very keen to do it. In a survey a while ago, primary-school teachers were asked whether they thought that that was important, and they agreed that it was.

Ms Brownlee: Is it done in P5?

Ms McCullough: That one was done in P5. You could adapt and gauge it. We will try to make sure that there is greater uptake, because it is a great scheme.

Ms Brownlee: No problem. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am guessing what certain career might be asked about. I am not sure that we will put that to the test in a couple of places just yet, to be honest. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McCullough: I do not think that anybody drew a politician.

Mr Boylan: We will not record that. We will work that one out.

Ms McCullough: My favourite one was a panda hugger, but they wrote "panda huger". *[Laughter.]*

Ms Forsythe: Thank you all very much for being here today. As a mum of three school-age children whose aspirations range from being an artist to a marine biologist to a computer games designer, I am really interested to take on board how you capture that.

I represent the South Down area, and I thank Karen for mentioning the Newry, Mourne and Down labour market partnership. We have seen the hands-on engagement — my children have been involved with some of that — particularly with STEM-related organisations in the constituency, so that is really good work.

I want to ask, Ronnie, about collaboration with the Department for the Economy. Is the Department of Education really taking joint responsibility for the framework, given that no specific target dates have been set in that important action plan and that, in some cases, there has been a failure to assign an action owner to many things in the lead Departments?

Mr Armour: The answer is that, yes, we have taken responsibility. Could we do better? You highlighted some areas where we absolutely need to do better. There has been a lot of learning from what has gone on over the past couple of years, and we are willing to do that. The gateway review and other things have drawn that out for us. Be in no doubt, though, that there is the commitment to work together. In the short time that I have been looking at this, I have been able to see the collaboration that is going on between Linsey, Moira and others across the two Departments, Karen's included. Yes, we are committed to it, but, absolutely, there is much more work to be done, and we need to get much better at it.

Ms Forsythe: Last week, when Moira was here, she echoed the same sentiment, and we could hear a lot of the good collaboration coming through in what she said. As we move forward with the framework, will there be a commitment to assign actual action owners and departmental leads?

Mr Armour: Yes, absolutely. It is vital that we do that. We should have done it, but it is now vital that we do, so, absolutely, that is what we will do.

Ms Forsythe: Without that, everybody is working together and doing good work but nobody is responsible or accountable, and there is nobody for us to put questions to about progress.

Mr Armour: Absolutely.

Mr Delargy: I was going to talk a bit more about collaboration, but, to be honest, it has been talked about quite a bit, and I want to get into the attendance piece. I should declare an interest as a former primary-school teacher for this and my next question.

I am glad that you are talking about skills. Career progression begins so early, as does learning those skills. One thing that I have noticed is that, no matter what school you are in, attendance overall is getting worse and worse year-on-year. I am keen to hear about the strategies that are you putting in place to stop that, because it is chronic. My opinion, and the opinion of many who have worked in the profession, is that the restrictions around it are not stringent enough. A total of 80% to 85% non-attendance rate is now commonplace, so there will be skills gaps if children are missing so much school due to a range of factors. What are you doing to support young people to develop skills and to tackle those circumstances?

Mrs Farrell: You are right. School non-attendance is a significant concern, a growing one and one that is not unique to Northern Ireland. When we get together with colleagues across the four nations and the Republic of Ireland, that is a common theme, and there is no doubt that the pandemic is continuing to cast its long shadow over school attendance. There is also, I think, a breakdown in the social contract between parents and schools and a difference in attitude towards school as somewhere that you must attend. I do not think that any one action is going to solve that.

The Minister is very conscious of the issue, so work is ongoing in the Department on a revised attendance strategy. It takes a step back and looks holistically at the range of factors that we believe will make an impact on school attendance. That is based on our engagement across the system with a lot of schools and our observation of where there is really good practice. Where we have seen a lot of the best practice is in schools that are not overtly saying, "This is an attendance intervention"; it is in those schools that are bringing a very holistic approach to the well-being and learning of the children who are in their care. It is about supporting their well-being, removing the barriers that might prevent them getting to and staying in school but then, importantly, making sure that, when they are in school, they are benefiting from a high-quality educational experience through an engaging, modern and relevant curriculum. Work is ongoing on that school attendance strategy.

We have also been doing a lot more with the messaging about school attendance, with that public messaging reminding parents of the importance of school attendance. We have noticed that there is perhaps a bit of a misunderstanding in the reporting, in that people maybe equate 90% with being a really good thing, because, if you got 90% in a test, that would be very good. Actually, 90% attendance is an issue, so we have been doing some work on increasing the understanding of that. We also held an attendance summit earlier in the year where we brought those in the education system together and, indeed, partners from outside the education system across health, business and industry and policing and justice to have a broader conversation on the issues around school attendance and how everybody could play a part in that.

Again, from speaking to colleagues in other places, I find that there is no doubt that this has been a difficult nut to crack, and part of it is the fact that there has been a complete sea change since the pandemic, so it is about how we recover from that. That is where some of the areas that the Minister set out in his key priorities are so important. On the face of it, you may not think that there is a relevance, but commissioning a curriculum review has been about making sure that what we have is world-leading, engaging, modern and relevant. Setting out the need for qualifications reform is about making sure that they are modern, world-leading and relevant and that they provide the appropriate pathways to young people. There is also a focus on teacher professional learning, which we talked about today, and making sure that we have a strong, highly skilled and confident workforce that can address the challenges that they see in their classrooms today.

I do not think that there is any single one action, but, hopefully, that gives you a bit of a sense of how we are approaching it, Pádraig.

Mr Delargy: Absolutely. I really appreciate the detail on that. It is so important for this conversation, because we have already talked about parental engagement and collaboration, and not having the attendance piece as part of the skills conversation risks leaving children who are already falling behind

further behind and widens that skills gap. If we are going to adequately and equitably challenge that, we have to look at how we deliver for every single child who is taught in our schools and colleges.

On the colleges, I want to go back to the point about collaboration between FE and schools. I work really closely with a lot of the schools and colleges in my constituency in Derry, but there clearly has been a move in recent years away from FE. That is despite the fantastic work that is being done. I know that some of that has recuperated by student numbers increasing and so on. We had a discussion between the Economy and Education, and a lot of the reason for that move is that the way that schools are funded is dependent on numbers. That is obviously a critical reason, but, on skills, this is key. How and what are you doing to remedy that situation? Are you looking at the schools' model to make sure that it is not about student numbers but that a broader measure is used? How are we getting to the core of that issue?

Ms McCullough: Can I check what stage we are talking about? Is this about the end of year 12 and whether they go into year 13 in a school or go to FE?

Mr Delargy: Yes.

Ms McCullough: The data that we have from our school census shows that just over 60% of year 12s carry on to year 13 in their school, and that proportion has been pretty static for the past 10 years or so. The absolute numbers change because of demographics, as you said. In 2020, it was the lowest number that the 16-to-19 group had been since the 1950s or something, but now we are seeing an increase. Higher numbers are going into FE, but the proportion is not really changing. Around 60% are staying in school; something like a fifth — around 22% or 23% — are going into FE; 8% are going into training; and 5% are going into employment. That is the kind of pattern that exists.

Our policies and legislation are for everyone. They have been constructed in the best interests of learners, and they promote collaboration at that stage. As you said, a number of factors can have an influence, such as accessibility of settings, pupil and parental preference, and cost. Learners can still be registered at school but taking FE courses, so there is still that ongoing collaboration. It does not mean that learners are not going into FE. Rather, they may be doing FE courses as part of a broader curriculum.

Mr Delargy: That is exactly the point that I was going to touch on, because the figures are skewed by the fact that students are staying registered at school but are perhaps doing two of their three A levels at college. The onus is on schools to say, "If that is the skill that you want to develop, and if that is the career path that you want to follow, your best education pathway clearly lies in a college", yet they are holding on to them. We cannot blame the schools for that, because that is their funding model. What work are you doing with DFE to try to end that? The figures are definitely skewed by the fact that students who, in the past, would have gone to FE colleges are now staying in school for that very reason.

Ms McCullough: It is something that has been discussed, and two points come up all the time: one is about their staying in school, while the other is about schools offering courses that would be better taught in FE colleges. The best interests of learners, not those of the institutions, should be at the core of such decisions. That is what we try to promote. We have the entitlement framework, and we provide funding for collaboration. There is also a range of qualification approval processes in place. The first is through the awarding organisation that offers the qualification. It sets the criteria for the skills and resources that need to be available to the learners in centres that are providing the learning, so it decides that. We offer an open qualifications market. The awarding organisation therefore asks whether the setting is suitable to be a registered provider. That is the first part. The second part is that we have legislation that requires qualifications that are being taught in school to be approved by the Department. If the qualification is approved, it goes on the Northern Ireland entitlement framework qualifications accreditation number (NIEFQAN) file and is available for schools to offer.

We also have a process for large-sized qualifications, because our position is that schools should have a broad and balanced curriculum. If a school thinks that the best option for individual learners is for them to do one of the large-sized qualifications — something that is larger than three GCSEs or two A levels — we have a process in place whereby the school has to apply, by exception, to offer that course for those learners. We want to check that all the due diligence has been done and that there has been a discussion with everyone involved to determine that that is the right place for those learners to be. Those are the kinds of systems that we have in place. It is not simply the case that one

applies and gets it. There are courses that are not approved, and schools can be told, "No, that isn't the right place for that to happen".

There are some instances in which it is really clear. Learners may be doing something that requires specialist equipment. We have seen that, having visited places. They therefore want to be in that centre. Sometimes, there is more of a question mark over where something is more classroom-based. A decision then has to be made, and schools look at timetabling and at the cost and value for money against outcomes achieved by the learners and how much the school is paying for it. That is perhaps where we see more of that.

Mr Delargy: Absolutely. I want to make one final point, Chair. Sorry. I promise that I will not ask to come in again, although I could ask about this all day. I find it a really interesting area, and I really appreciate the detail that has been provided and what you have said about the complexities involved.

For me, the best example is construction. Quite a few schools now offer a course in construction. Are students better learning construction in a classroom for two years or out getting that experience full-time at a college? We know that there is a shortage of those key skills in the economy. My specific question is this: what work are you doing in collaboration with DFE to look at removing that funding model and putting the onus back on getting people into colleges?

Ms McCullough: Funding is on the list of things to look at in the 14-19 framework. Nothing has been really progressed on that yet, however.

You mentioned collaboration. It is really important that careers advisers from the Careers Service, which provides that impartial and independent advice, go into schools and have the conversations as well.

Mr Delargy: Absolutely.

Ms McCullough: People need to see it and hear it in order to understand the pathways. The information from DFE's careers occupational information unit is really helpful. It has produced fantastic bulletins about career paths.

Mr Delargy: Brilliant. Thanks very much.

Ms Forsythe: You have spoken a lot about collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy. I will move on to duplication. We have mentioned the financial pressures on schools and colleges. Given that both Departments know that we have duplication of provision, particularly post-16, can you quantify the impact of that duplication on the quality and equity of provision, Ronnie? Are resources potentially being wasted?

Mr Armour: I do not think that we are in a position to do that today. I am happy to take the question away and look at it, but, to be honest, I cannot quantify it today.

Mrs Farrell: That was reflected in the 14-19 framework and is why the action around developing a stand-alone, refined sixth-form policy is so important: so that we can get under the skin of the extent of the duplication and see what is happening with the implementation of the entitlement framework. We do not have that level of analysis at this point, but we will get into that when we develop the policy.

Ms McCullough: On that point, we are starting a review of the entitlement framework in order to establish the extent to which it has delivered on what it was intended to deliver on and what the challenges and barriers have been. We are collecting information from an entitlement framework audit and interrogating it to see what the patterns and impacts have been — in particular, the impact of reduced funding — to add to the discussion about the barriers. That work is under way.

Ms Forsythe: It is great to hear that the Departments are looking at that, because it is a really important area. There is such wide recognition of it, so why was the post-16 theme in the framework, including agreeing the offering of the various schools and colleges, not considered to be a higher priority than other things, such as careers?

Mrs Farrell: That discussion came from a recognition that there was a need to build confidence in the 14-19 framework in order to build momentum. DFE colleagues were already doing a lot of work on

careers through the portal. That was seen as a good early action to focus on in order to exemplify the collaboration and get a physical product in place as soon as possible. That is what was behind the decision to prioritise it over the post-16 theme. It was an early action taken, as I said, but the Minister has announced the need to review qualification specifications and take forward a programme of qualifications reform, which will pick up on what the offering should be in sixth form.

Ms McCullough: We have started to look at all the information on sixth-form provision as well, because it is in there. There are key questions that we need to answer, because lots of policies impact on sixth-form provision. There is the entitlement framework, admissions and funding. Lots of things are already happening that shape the provision. It is therefore about coming back to these fundamental questions: who should go, what should they do there, and where should they go afterwards? We need to be clear about that and about all the offer across the post-16 environment. We also have to remember that parental and pupil choice, or preference, is in there.

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely. There is clearly a lot of work going on in that area, and I really welcome it. As we move through our inquiry, we realise that the issue is so current and so live. It is not about a strategy from the past. Rather, we are going through it now. A number of things that you have mentioned are coming out really soon, in the weeks and months ahead. It will be good to reflect a lot of them in our inquiry report.

Ms McCullough: I do not think that it ever ends. There is no end point by which it will have happened, because things are constantly changing. You cannot take your eye off it. We do not want to set a false end point and say, "By this date, we will have done it", because we will never have done it, as things are changing all the time. It is about putting things in place to make sure that we are monitoring what is happening all the time and responding across the two Departments, particularly on the careers element.

Mr Armour: That is not to take away from the fact that there will be timescales set for the work that we are doing. Karen is right to say that it is an ongoing process — it will always be developing — but it is important that we have in place the timescales that we talked about earlier.

Ms Forsythe: It is also about having the potential for there to be good reporting on outcomes —

Mr Armour: Absolutely.

Ms Forsythe: — that removes duplication, is quantifiable and is demonstrable to people.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I will touch on that issue briefly. One key criticism of Departments is their silo-working mentality. That has very expensive consequences, with duplication being one example. I am a bit concerned that there is no means of quantifying, nor any attempt to quantify, the impact of duplication. It may be bold of me to ask this, but has any work been done on that?

Mr Armour: The answer is that no significant work has been done. Linsey mentioned that we will be looking at that as we move forward, but, at this point, we cannot quantify its impact.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): That is grand. It is important that that area be looked into, however.

Mr Armour: We accept that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is a huge waste of public resources and not a good use of money if two Departments are doing similar things.

Mr Gildernew: Reflecting on the totality of these conversations makes me think of the old truism that culture eats strategy for breakfast. How much of all of this therefore has to do with culture? We have heard a lot of talk about complications, resources and complexity, but is it all that complex? I recognise that there are issues with qualification reform, for example, but, in general, there could be action taking place at a simple level. For example, South West College (SWC) covers Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Is there any reason in the world that the schools in Fermanagh and South Tyrone could not invite colleges to come in to speak to their pupils at Key Stage 4, or even at Key Stage 2 or 3, to help set out the options for them? Daniel mentioned silos and the Departments using different

language. Is that different language being used to maintain silos rather than being an explanation for their existence? We need to consider the fundamentals and not potentially allow people to hide behind a complexity that is not really there.

Mr Armour: It is complex. That having been said, you are right about the language issue, but it is not being used just as a barrier to stop collaboration. There is no reason that schools could not act as you have said, but there are cultural issues — you are right — involved in how Departments work together and in how we break through that silo mentality. There are some really good examples of Departments having done that. Consider the childcare agenda in the Department of Education. There, you will see examples of Departments coming together to deliver the ministerial and Executive priority. On this issue, we have already acknowledged that we need to do better on collaboration. That is not to say that good collaboration is not taking place or that people are not working very hard. There are undoubtedly improvements to deliver, and the Audit Office report highlights those for us. That is the challenge as we move forward. The cultural barriers that you referred to can be overcome, and there are examples of cross-departmental working that demonstrate that they have been overcome.

Mr Gildernew: Pádraig is right when he says that we need to address the reverse incentives that block good joint working.

Mr Armour: Of course.

Mr Gildernew: Those are unfair, and they set schools up in a way that makes it very difficult for them.

Mr Armour: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: My next two questions are about the curriculum and qualifications. I will start with qualifications.

A persistent challenge has been a lack of parity of esteem between taking vocational courses and going down the academic route. That has been mentioned in the course of our inquiry. Until such times as we value the young person in a boiler suit just as much as we do the person in a graduation gown, that will persist. Has any work been done to address that? If so, what has been its impact?

Ms McCullough: I will pick up on that. That is another theme that ran through the whole 14-to-19 piece. Qualifications have a value in a particular context. The value of a qualification is in supporting learners on the pathway that they want to take. We talked earlier about approved qualifications. There are a large number of applied qualifications on the NIEFQAN file. Through the entitlement framework, schools are required to offer a balance of applied and general qualifications. In legislation, schools have to offer a third of the courses general, a third applied and then a third whatever meets the interests and needs of their learners. At the moment, the regulations state that there has to be an offer of 21 courses at Key Stage 4 and 21 at post-16. We therefore have in place things that give parity to applied and general qualifications.

You talked about culture. There is a space for ensuring that vocational qualifications are well understood by parents and employers, and, more widely, among the public.

Mr Gildernew: Are we holding graduation ceremonies for those young people, thus placing their qualifications on an equal footing with what we see in academia?

Ms McCullough: There are lots of things —.

Mrs Farrell: We do.

Ms McCullough: We do.

Mr Armour: We do, yes.

Mrs Farrell: Regional colleges do that type of thing. You are quite right, but this goes way beyond either DFE or DE. There is a societal issue around parity of esteem and around the understanding, as Karen says, of what a vocational pathway looks like and what it means. That is not to shy away from

the need for us to work on that. I am just saying that it is a societal thing with which we have to grapple.

I had a similar conversation last Friday with the Royal Irish Academy about parity of esteem between, for example, the STEM agenda and modern languages. It is an important conversation for us to have at a societal level. What skills do we need for the 21st century for our society and our economy, and how do we work collectively to get the pipeline right for vocational qualifications, arts and humanities and STEM? We are increasingly having those conversations with DFE now, but there is a job of work to do. We do, however, sense a change taking place through the growing number of apprenticeship routes available. There is change happening, but there is more to be done.

Mr Gildernew: South West College held its graduations last week, but the point is that those graduations are not promoted or valued in wider society. There may be a piece of work to do on changing the culture over time. It would not cost a fortune to do. Doing it will take time, but we need to make a start on it.

Mr Armour: You are absolutely right to say that it is about value. It is about how we foster that.

Mr Gildernew: That touches on my next question, which is on the curriculum. Is the Department clear that the curriculum that is offered aligns with the skills needed and with the career opportunities that we are looking at in the time ahead? Is that adequate at this stage? Can more be done?

Mrs Farrell: That is why the Minister, very early on after taking up office, identified the curriculum as being a priority area. You will be aware that he recently announced the commencement of a review of our curriculum. He commissioned Lucy Crehan, the author of 'Cleverlands', to undertake that work. It will be a very short, time-bound piece of work, to be completed before Easter, that will look at our curriculum through the lens of making sure that our children are equipped with the right knowledge, thus building the right knowledge in the right way and in the right sequence for them to have the appropriate skills to take into life as an individual and as a contributor to the economy and to society.

Mr Gildernew: The framework was published in 2020. Can you give me an example of something that has changed in that time and of what its impact has been?

Mrs Farrell: Sorry. Do you mean something in the curriculum in particular that has changed?

Mr Gildernew: Has anything changed in the curriculum as a result of the framework?

Mrs Farrell: As a result of the framework, the issues with the implementation of the existing curriculum were to be looked at. That was in the framework and highlighted in the 'A Fair Start' report. There was a sense from the 'A Fair Start' report and other reports, such as the one that led to the 14-19 framework, that our current curriculum was not necessarily being played out in classrooms. Issues with implementation were identified.

More recently, we were working with CCEA to roll out sessions on a curriculum refresh, starting with primary-school principals. In the intervening time, however, the Minister commissioned a full review of our curriculum, so we have hit pause on the curriculum refresh until we see what Lucy's report has to say about the role of knowledge in our existing curriculum. It is not about knowledge or skills but about making sure that the right knowledge is clearly included in our curriculum and that our teachers are clear about the knowledge that our children should have to enable them to exhibit and apply those skills.

Mr Gildernew: It is about making sure that all choices are available so that people can maximise what it is they do or what they wish to achieve and can be supported to do that.

Mrs Farrell: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Do any members have anything to add?

Mr Boylan: I have a wee point to add. I feel that I have to ask this question. *[Laughter.]* You may not want to answer it, however. It is clear that, although schools have their curriculum, they have autonomy to run the schools in such a way as to try to be as successful as possible. Let us therefore call it a competition. If we want to have serious conversations, that is one of the conversations that we

have to have. It is part and parcel of what Colm just brought up. The best opportunities should be offered to all pupils across the board. I understand that schools have to do what they have to do, but that has to be part of the conversation as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I invite the C&AG to comment at this point. Do you have any comments to make, Dorinnia?

Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): All happy. I invite the Treasury Officer of Accounts to comment.

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): I will make two comments from a Department of Finance perspective. This is an opportunity to raise an issue in response to what the witnesses said about the skills challenge. The Chair picked up on the IT example. I do a lot of work with the finance profession. Members will be aware that most Civil Service recruitment competitions are very successful. Indeed, they are oversubscribed. We are seeing a significant change in the number of applications in some of the professional and technical areas, however.

For me in particular, because the finance profession work — the production of the annual report and accounts, the budgeting work and the projections that feed into projects and strategies — is so important to the work of this Committee, there is an increasing risk of our not being able to recruit. Traditionally, going back 10 to 15 years, we were very successful at recruiting accountants. Colleagues in the Audit Office are encountering a similar challenge, I think. That will be an issue for us going forward.

We have alternative strategies in place. We have introduced a trainee accountant scheme and are looking at introducing higher-level apprenticeships to try to mimic some of the big accountancy firms that recruit directly from schools. Looking to the future, it is definitely about alignment for us. That includes alignment in secondary education to ensure that pupils get the necessary skill set and are aware of the career opportunities that exist.

We currently have a significant number of vacancies at some of the critical Civil Service grades. This is an opportunity to flag that to the Committee and to reinforce some of the messages that you heard from the panel.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Stuart. We are conscious of the challenges with recruitment and retention in various sectors. We are equally conscious of the fact that the situation is extremely competitive in some sectors, almost to the extent that employers are bidding for the talented individual whom they require. It is unbalanced, leaning more towards one sector than another in some instances. Habits have changed as well. COVID reconfigured people's expectations of work-life balance quite a bit.

There are major challenges, and all Departments need to look at them very seriously. We had a similar discussion this morning at the Committee for Communities, which Colm chairs. The challenges affect all areas, and they need to be dealt with. I have no doubt that younger people's expectations have shifted away from going down the more traditional routes. Cheryl mentioned TikTok. Not only are younger people being influenced by TikTok but they want to be influencers on TikTok. There has been a real shift in attitudes.

Ms Brownlee: That was one of the *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Boylan: Put that in the report, Cheryl.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): There are challenges there, and we are very cognisant of that fact. Is there anything further that you would like to add? Are you happy enough?

Mr Armour: No, Chair, I do not think that there is anything further to add. Thank you for your time today.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Again, Ronnie, I wish you well —.

Mr Armour: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): — and thank you and your colleagues, Linsey and Karen, for appearing before the Committee. We appreciate your enduring questions for almost two hours and your honest answers. I have no doubt that the Committee is quite satisfied with the responses that we have received, so thank you again. We are aiming to publish the inquiry report in the new year, and I am sure that you are looking forward to reading it.

Mr Armour: I look forward to it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you.