



Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Developing the Skills for Northern
Ireland's Future: Northern Ireland Youth
Assembly

30 January 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Buchanan
Mr Colin Crawford
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Ms Diane Forsythe
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr David Honeyford

Witnesses:

Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Ms Paige Brennan-Collins	Youth Assembly
Mr Rory Brown	Youth Assembly
Ms Bláthnaid Girvan	Youth Assembly
Mr Harrison Kerr	Youth Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I welcome Bláthnaid Girvan, Harrison Kerr, Rory Brown and Paige Brennan-Collins, all of whom are Members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly; and Ms Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General. Stuart Stevenson from the Department of Finance will join us shortly. I also welcome the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly staff team — Lucy, Claire and Ren — and thank them for facilitating the session today. It is greatly appreciated; they are all smiles there.

Bláthnaid, Harrison, Rory and Paige, we have been looking forward to meeting and engaging with you but, more importantly, having you with us to share some of your questions, which we are happy to take. When we ask questions of you, do not be afraid to challenge us a wee bit. I invite you to present your report in whatever way you have arranged. If members have any questions for the Youth Assembly, please indicate accordingly.

Ms Bláthnaid Girvan (Youth Assembly): Hello, everyone, and thank you for having us today. I will begin by giving you some brief background about the Youth Assembly. The other Members will talk about access to qualifications; careers guidance; academic and vocational skills; and skills with collaborative practice.

The Youth Assembly is a diverse group of 90 young people between the ages of 13 and 17. We are from every constituency, and we represent section 75 categories. The Youth Assembly performs three functions: to engage with the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically Assembly Committees, on

legislation and inquiries that are relevant to young people; to undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly Committees; and to enable consultation with Government Departments to participate in youth voice projects.

As Youth Assembly Members, we were grateful to receive a briefing from the Public Accounts Committee staff. We offer special thanks to Deputy Chairperson, Cheryl Brownlee MLA, and Committee staff for meeting Youth Assembly Members. At that meeting, we gave our views via a Mentimeter survey, which can be found in member's packs.

Mr Rory Brown (Youth Assembly): Hello. I will talk about the Youth Assembly's thoughts on access to qualifications. Most Members stated that they had been offered a wide range of qualifications at their school. However, issue was taken with the attitude of some schools towards university, in that it is seen as the "default" option, while tech is seen as a "last resort".

Students also said that they are required to achieve a certain number of points or grades in order to stay on for their next year of GCSEs or to come back after their AS levels. We feel that that may affect the choices that they make. One Member, who attended an all-ability school, said that they were offered a wide range of qualification opportunities. Members said that they would like more options at GCSE, such as PE, politics and other subjects that might not be traditionally taught. Some stated that they feel limited by the number of required subjects that take up valuable slots in the timetable and want more access to vocational subjects.

Mr Harrison Kerr (Youth Assembly): Hello. I will address the issue of careers guidance in schools. Members' experiences are mostly positive. The advice that is provided by schools is thought to be generally useful although, as Rory said, there is a greater emphasis on the A levels and uni pathway. Members had the opportunity in their schools to meet a range of adults to discuss their future, and you can find more information on that in your packs.

It was noted, however, that more personalised advice that takes into account every student's specific situation and individual strengths would be appreciated. We think that one-on-one meetings, in particular, would facilitate that. My fellow Member Bláthnaid said that, as a young carer, she would like advice on how to manage her unique responsibilities so that she can plan for her career.

Previously, the Youth Assembly engaged with Syrian Youth Voices, some of whom described how, as newcomers to Northern Ireland, they struggle to manage the transition and to understand the academic system, and how they would like more support from their schools in that regard. Members also reported problems with consistency of delivery of careers advice, which can vary greatly across schools, and some students may be disadvantaged in future as a result.

Members would like opportunities to find out more about careers through guided research and work experience, which we will discuss in more detail later. They would value advice and counsel from former students and more information on study opportunities abroad.

Ms Paige Brennan-Collins (Youth Assembly): Hello. I want to touch on a range of points, beginning with academic versus vocational qualifications. The vast majority of Members stated that academic and vocational qualifications are not equally promoted or valued. Members feel that they are expected to continue on to sixth form and that only academic subjects were available. Members were also quoted as saying that apprenticeships are "undervalued" and:

"only seen as an option if you're struggling with academics".

Some Members reported that their teachers encourage pupils to take their subject, even if it might not suit the pupil. Some Members stated that their teachers said that they did not want their timetables filled with Learning for Life and Work lessons. One Member reported that teachers of some subjects are more open to vocational routes.

Most Members were not aware of the skills needed in Northern Ireland. Following the survey, we had a discussion about the importance of areas such as STEM and ICT. Members were equally split on whether the current curriculum is aligned to those areas. We believe that the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy should work closely together so that skills are able to meet our economic needs.

Members were split on the question of collaborative practices, and they suggested that they were more common in non-selective post-primary schools than in grammar schools. Members are aware of examples of duplication, and cited examples of schools that offer vocational courses that are also offered at the local FE college.

I will finish with two points regarding work experience and beginning the careers journey earlier. Some Members stated that work experience is becoming less common because schools cannot afford the insurance required for pupils. They agreed that work experience is an important part of exploring future careers. Members also feel that careers education must begin earlier in the school journey and that there should be better links between schools, local businesses and FE colleges.

Thank you very much. We are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you. The presentations were excellent and very detailed. The four of you are exceptional communicators. Well done on providing us with your insights into where the gaps, challenges and frustrations are, and also where the opportunities are.

I will pick up on work experience before I open up the meeting to members. All of you touched on the experience element. Paige, do you feel that getting that experience earlier in the educational journey is critical in shaping ideas on what you want to do? When I think back, at one time, I wanted to fly planes as a pilot. I wanted to be a psychiatrist. I wanted to be a solicitor —

A Member: We wish you had done all those things. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Do not ask how I have ended up as a politician, which is far from flying planes. It is a bit like being a psychiatrist, on some days, and it deals with some of the legal parts, so maybe I have a role that is all-encompassing.

When I was going through school, I felt that I did not have the best possible advice and guidance in relation to work experience. Some would say that that is clear. What is your experience of that? Do you think that it happens early enough or that it should happen sooner? How good was it? Harrison, you mentioned the one-on-one element. How do you think that would improve shaping what you would like to do in the future?

Ms Brennan-Collins: Next week, I will pick my A level subjects. I have had no work experience. In the meeting, one of our Youth Assembly workers stated that they wanted to become a solicitor or lawyer, like you did. However, when they went off on work experience, they realised that they did not want to do that. When picking a career, people may have a false idea of what that entails. They might go on to study for that career and realise that they do not like it. Through work experience, we would be able to see that earlier and make a good decision on what career we want, because we would know what that career is like.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you for that. A student who has not had work experience may have an idea of what it is to be, say, a solicitor. Originally, I thought a solicitor goes to court and fights for somebody, which all sounds good. What people do not realise — I certainly did not realise it — is that, behind the scenes, there is a mountain of paperwork and endless days in the office. It is not a nine-to-five job, and you are on call seven days a week. I changed my course, and I am still on call seven days a week — *[Laughter.]*

A Member: You do all those things.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I do all those things.

Do you think that that has a knock-on effect? People pursue a course at A level and then at university, going in that direction. Then, when they get to the career and realise what it is about, they think, "Oh my God. I've spent the last number of years doing all this, and it's not for me. It is not a right fit".

Ms Brennan-Collins: Yes, I believe it has. As you know, university can be very expensive. People might go down a route and realise that they do not like it, and they will have to pay university fees for something that they do not even like doing. By having work experience, they will be able to make an informed decision without paying a whole load of money and wasting time and then having to go and study a new thing.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is it right to say that schools need to do more to provide opportunities for work experience at an earlier stage?

Ms Brennan-Collins: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK.

Mr Kerr: They definitely need to. With online meetings and such becoming more popular, we cannot afford to forget about in-person work experience and a student actually being there and sitting beside the person who is doing what you might want to do in the future. Work experience has slowly started to move online in some areas — obviously, there are career areas in which that is less relevant — and that is a problem. The careers department in my school is very good at passing on the information, but it does not really engage directly with whatever organisation is providing the work experience. That careers department kind of just directs you to a website or whatever, and it is up to you to reach out to that organisation personally.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you.

You are at this point in your educational journey and will be moving to the next chapter. Someone mentioned the cost of tuition fees for attending university, which have increased significantly since I was at university. Is that now a deciding factor in determining whether you will or will not pursue a course that you would enjoy and, ultimately, will need for the future, or does it not feature at all? Is the cost of tuition at university affecting your decisions on what route you take?

Ms Brennan-Collins: For me, yes. In our careers class, which is only half an hour a week, we look at different courses and are encouraged to look at the fees. When you see that those fees are so high, it really turns you off, because you question how you will pay them. You will have to work a part-time job alongside studying at university. It puts you off a bit.

Ms Girvan: I am a young carer. I cannot really get a part-time job because I help my family care for my sister. It definitely affects your decision. If I was looking at a course and was totally in love with it, but it was six years long and cost £5,000 per year plus accommodation costs, that would put me off straight away. There would be no way for me to get the money to do that course that I really, really wanted to do.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Bláthnaid. I will open it to the floor.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you all very much for coming here today. My colleague Cheryl Brownlee said that she had a fantastic session with you, and she apologises for not being here. We got great feedback from her.

I want to build on what you said about how, without work experience, people have an idea about what things are, and about how we can try to make the experience better for those of you who are living this. I studied law, and I was inspired by the idea of what it would be. I will not lie: it was based on the movie 'Legally Blonde'. *[Laughter.]* I did well at school. I liked the idea of proving everyone wrong and showing that you can be a good, strong, smart woman and do well and still dress the part. That was very much in keeping with my thinking. When I was at university, I started to do work experience. I did not like it in a solicitor's office, and I did not like it in the halls of the Bar. However, a law degree is fantastic because it develops particular skills in drafting and analysing legislation and speed-reading — all those types of skills. I then went on, through a postgrad course, to train to be an accountant, and, when working on different things, those skills assisted me. I am now an MLA and am involved in writing legislation, so the skill base went with me.

The inquiry that we are doing is about the skills need, and some of your feedback was that people are not aware of skills. It is very much, "What job do you want to do?", not, "What skills can we build on?". What could we do in schools to make it more about skills and to shape it around that, rather than saying, "What job do you want to do?"?

Mr Kerr: I will refer back to my earlier point about one-on-one careers interviews that are tailored to individuals' strengths and interests. After all, if teachers have been teaching us for quite a few years, they will get to know our strengths and weaknesses, what we like doing and what we do not like doing. We will bring our own opinions to a careers meeting, obviously, but it would be great if teachers also

explained what we might do. Some people have an idea of what they want to do right away, but others do not. Having more teacher guidance and suggestions as well as communication with a careers adviser throughout the year, rather than at just one meeting before you make your choices, would definitely make people more aware of the skills that are needed in Northern Ireland and the kinds of job that would be personally suited to them.

Mr Brown: I also feel that making the process more personalised for each student is a very necessary improvement. When I went for my careers interview to decide on my GCSE subjects, it felt like the careers adviser had received very little information about what I was good or bad at. It was a case of, "We will figure that out in the 10 minutes that we have with you". There was more of a focus on the academic results than on practical skills. There was no indication of whether I was good at practical skills or memorising or writing or that sort of thing; it was more that they looked at a number and decided everything based on that. Careers teachers should be provided with more insight into each student — I am not sure what to call it; not statistics, but that sort of thing — so that they can gain more of an idea of the sort of career path that they would like to go down.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you. Do you think that it would be useful to have more people who are in jobs or positions that you admire or aspire to come back to your schools so that you can ask, "What did you study? How did you get there? What was your path?"? Everybody's path is different. Everybody has a different shape for how they got there.

Ms Brennan-Collins: My school is hosting a careers day next week. A whole load of organisations are coming in, and many pupils from other schools are coming to our school to get information about what the careers entail. However, while I am not saying that that is pointless, our A level subject choices day is the day before that: we are getting that advice on careers, yet some of us will be picking our A level subjects the day before. We may get crucial information at the careers day but have picked the wrong A level subjects to carry on with a career that interests us.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you very much. That is really useful. I appreciate it. We hear a lot from the officials who set the policies, but it is so important to hear about the lived experience of those who are in education at the moment. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have a question before I bring in Colm Gildernew. I am not asking you to single out any of your teachers in any way, shape or form, because I would not pretend to know everything about every possible career, but is the current model the best model to ensure that you are equipped with the information that you need to make decisions about your future career, job or general opportunities? *[Pause.]* What could they be doing with? How do you answer that without selling your teachers out? *[Laughter.]* Basically, should the people with the experience come in and give a range of options from each sector, rather than a teacher being expected to be able to explain about finance, ICT, STEM and various other things? Should it be a case of specific experts coming in and providing an open day for you at an earlier age so that you can say, "I like that", and go further into that area, questioning them on that?

Ms Brennan-Collins: Yes.

Mr Brown: I definitely had that issue. My school could only manage to get one teacher, who, in each lesson, would give ideas about what could be done. The best they could do was to give you a bit of information on each job sector. It is not my school's fault, but it felt like there was quite a bit of pressure on a few teachers who only knew about a few sectors but had to teach about the other sectors. Although, over the years, people came into school to give us information on their line of work, and that was really helpful. It could be hard to cover a wide range of jobs and opportunities, but bringing in people who work in a sector currently is the best approach. It would be hard to achieve. It feels like having people come in to tell you about what it is like to work in their position is a "perfect world" idea.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: I thank you all for coming along, and I thank the facilitators. I should have declared an interest at the start: I previously worked, as an MLA, with Bláthnaid on the issue of young carers. That was a number of years ago, which will give you some idea of Bláthnaid's calibre and commitment. I have two boys — one is starting his GCSEs, and the other is in his final year of A levels — so I have a personal awareness of the issues that we are discussing. Bláthnaid, you should never minimise or

underestimate the skills that you already have as a young carer. You have transferable skills: organising time, prioritising and all the things that any employer is keen to have. Never neglect to mention that in any of your applications.

Ms Girvan: Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: I thank Bláthnaid for setting out the role of the Youth Assembly. I should also have declared an interest in that, as the Chair of the Communities Committee, I have worked with the Youth Assembly to inform the Committee on the Pensions Bill. I am well aware of the calibre of the work of the Youth Assembly and its facilitators, and your commitment to preparing and engaging on these issues to give your experience and knowledge in order to inform decisions that will have an impact on your lives. It is crucial that the Youth Assembly is here and involved in those conversations.

Rory's contribution was very interesting. He mentioned the ability to study PE, politics and other subjects. As you can see, I majored in politics more than PE, but your point is very well made. I had the opportunity, for example, to study Latin, which is very useful across a range of languages. I hear that subjects such as history are dropping off the curriculums. It is important to study what you want to study as well as studying for a career or job, although I know we are focusing on the skills and the careers side today.

Paige made an excellent point. After the session, we should further consider the issue of young people not being aware of the skills needed. That is fundamental, basic and easily addressed. If a pupil does not have the information, how can they make informed choices? Providing that information could easily be included as a recommendation and as part of our contribution.

My question is to all of you, but it touches on Harrison's point about the structure of careers advice. We know that universities frequently go into schools to set out their stall. Do you feel that you hear enough about other opportunities and pathways directly from local colleges, industry and businesses? Do they get an opportunity to come into your schools to set out the skills that are needed for those career paths, rather than the focus being solely on academic achievement?

Mr Kerr: From my experience at school, there have definitely been elements of that, especially for engineering and technology. Local organisations and FE colleges have come into school to explain to pupils who are interested about the careers that those pathways could lead to. Former students who have pursued a range of professions, from medicine to IT to engineering, have also been in. That is definitely a key element of careers education: hearing from people who have gone down a career path about their experience — the positives, along with what they have maybe regretted doing — and what the next generation should be aware of before they go into that profession.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you.

Mr Honeyford: You have covered a lot of bases, which is really useful. My kids are slightly older, with one being out of uni and one at uni. I found that advice that they got when they were doing their A levels was UCAS form filling-out advice rather than careers advice. That is not to take anything away from the teachers, who were brilliant at that. Daniel talked a minute ago about how you would get careers advice. Just to tease that out a little, how would you want to hear that advice? As Daniel said, the teacher cannot know everything. How would you want that to be presented to you, and how could that be done evenly across different schools?

Ms Brennan-Collins: About two weeks ago, I had a 15-minute phone call with a careers adviser. It was informative, but a one-to-one interview that lasted a lot longer would have been much better and felt more personal. While the careers call was good and, prior to it, I was able to give information about my GCSEs, the volunteering opportunities I have taken and what I am interested in, it did not feel as personal as I wanted it to. It went by quickly, so I was not able to put all my points across while listening to the careers adviser's advice about moving on. A longer and more detailed in-person interview with a careers adviser and maybe even someone from the school who knows me and what I am good at would help a lot in figuring out a good career that would suit me.

Mr Brown: I felt the same as some Youth Assembly Members seemed to in what they said about careers meetings. When they had a meeting, it was more about filling out the form to get their GCSE choices done than about asking, "What are you interested in? What sort of profession are you looking to get into?". That was because of the short length of the calls, which was a big limiting factor in exploring a variety of opportunities.

Mr Kerr: When careers education begins and ends is also important. I feel the same way as other Youth Assembly Members who commented that careers education should begin earlier in the school journey, at the start of secondary school, and that there should be regular meetings with the same careers adviser rather than someone who is just getting to know your situation, so that you can continue to consult them on any problems or issues or any opportunities that you would like to know more about.

Ms Girvan: People could also meet in small groups of those who know each other or who are interested in similar things. That way, a careers adviser could cover more people and the stuff that they are interested in and then go and help others.

Mr Honeyford: I have two things to ask about really quickly. You mentioned work experience. How do you access that? How are you able to access what you would want to do? *[Pause.]*

Ms Brennan-Collins: We do not know.

Ms Girvan: I do not know.

Ms Brennan-Collins: I do not know whether we receive work experience. In my school, some people mention doing work experience, but I do not know whether the school has provided that for them or they did it themselves. We have no clue about how to access that.

Mr Honeyford: OK. Finally, I will pick up on what you said about fees and how you would pay them. It is really concerning to hear that the next generation that is coming through is facing that barrier to third-level education. You have seen a barrier and said, "How do I pay this?". Is it your understanding — this could be a communication thing — that you have to pay the £5,000 in fees as well as paying the cost of living?

Ms Brennan-Collins: I know that you can get student loans and grants — my aunt went to university. However, when you get a loan, it is a continuous process. My aunt is around 37, and she has just finished paying her uni fees. She has a quite high-paying job, so she was able to pay those off quickly. Some people who go to uni will have a lower-paid job and will continue to pay off their fees for an extended period, while having to pay rent or mortgages along with other bills.

Mr Honeyford: OK, dead on.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I can completely agree with you. I literally made my last payment in the last couple of months, and I am out of university 15 years, so I know exactly what it is like.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you for coming before us today. It is great to see young people here addressing the Committee and hear them speaking to us in such an informed way.

Is the careers choice broad enough? Does it cover all the areas that, as young people, you feel, it should be covering? Do you see any gaps in it?

Mr Kerr: Some areas get a higher level of attention than others. A lot more support is available for the big careers, such as medicine, because many students have done that and are able to retell their experiences. I cannot think of any off the top of my head, but there probably are some sectors that are not really addressed, particularly in grammar schools.

Ms Brennan-Collins: To add to Harrison's point, I go to an all-girls' grammar school, and I believe that a lot of STEM subjects are put forward while others, such as those in the arts or English or other languages, are almost neglected because the push for women to go into STEM is strong in grammar schools.

Mr Brown: I also feel that there are gaps, especially in more arts-based subjects, which are left to the side and are prioritised less. Things to do with those subjects are not given much thought. For example, we are taught about the different types of doctors and teachers and so on, but we are never taught about what artists do or how to get into that sort of thing. Especially in grammar schools, there is more focus on academic subjects that lead, for example, to medicine. That sort of thing is prioritised more, so I would say that there are massive gaps.

Mr T Buchanan: Just to follow on from that — you have answered my second question, but I am going to ask it anyway — do you feel that it is balanced between academic and practical? That is, for example, between academics, solicitors or doctors or whatever and plumbers or joiners — the academic versus the practical. Is that balanced or is more pressure put on the academic side?

Mr Brown: There is definitely more pressure put on the academic side. To go back to one of your examples, I did not know what a joiner was until a couple of months ago, because no one told me. It was assumed that, because I go to a grammar school, I would do something more academic. Those career paths are definitely not pushed or even mentioned.

Ms Girvan: I go to an all-ability school, where both routes are pushed equally. We had options talks today, and it is always said that you can stay back at school or go elsewhere. Today, the school talked about making bespoke plans for those who did not get the six GCSEs that they need to get in. They could have four or five and repeat the ones that they needed and do an A level. However, the Southern Regional College (SRC) and the like are pushed as equally as coming back is.

Mr T Buchanan: Some people are cut out for the academic side; for some, it is more the practical side. Of course, I am a qualified joiner and a stonemason and all of that type of thing. I do not know why I ended up here, but there you are. *[Laughter.]* There is an opening, if you like, for the real practical side as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Tom. A jack of all trades is what you were saying there.

Mr T Buchanan: And master of none. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Crawford: I join the others in saying, "Thank you", genuinely. Thank you for your time here today. It has been an absolute pleasure to have you — not only to have you but to take time to listen to you and, hopefully, as a Committee, to take on board what you have said. Hopefully, we can go away and help you guys in the long run.

Both of my questions have been answered. That is the problem about going last. The first question was about resources that would help you to make better-informed choices. Harrison touched on that. The second question, which has been answered, was about the introduction of careers advice or careers support earlier in your school journey.

Again, thank you for your time. I am sure that it has not been easy, coming in front of this crowd, but it has been really beneficial, so thank you all so much.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Pádraig Delargy and then Colm, briefly.

Pádraig, can you hear us? Pádraig is coming on remotely all the way from the north-west. Maybe he can hear us now. Pádraig, can you hear us?

Colm, you go on ahead briefly, and then we will come back to Pádraig.

Mr Gildernew: I have a follow-up question. I note that, several times, you have referred to the need for one-to-one advice more often and for a longer time when getting that advice. Is there potentially a role for that to be online, at times, if it were increased? Could that be done online rather than physically one-to-one? Is there potential for us to look at having a system whereby you would have online access more regularly? Would that work for you or does it need to be in person? I just want to check that.

Ms Girvan: Personally, I think that it would be the same. I do not think that there would be much difference. We have all got used to being online. I do not think that there would be much difference in the quality.

Mr Gildernew: It might be part of the solution in improving that end of things, so I just wanted to check before you got away on us. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Pádraig, can you hear us now? Your microphone is not on.

The Committee Clerk: It may be a glitch.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It may be a glitch, yes.

Thank you very much for your presentation, for taking our questions and for answering them so well. You have been open and honest about the experiences that you have all gone through and, ultimately, where some of the gaps are.

We all had an idea, when we were of an age, of what we thought we wanted to do, without being informed with proper information about what that actually meant. I fear that, even so many years after I left school, that is still the case. The truth is that work experience is invaluable in giving you real insight into what it means to be a doctor, solicitor, joiner, plumber — all those things. Only when you actually see it in action will you understand whether you want to do it or not, and minds change as time goes on.

I have had a number of interesting conversations over the past few years with an organisation called Speakers for Schools. Have you heard of it? It is a very good organisation; you can find it on Google. It has said that, right now, over half of state-educated students in schools and colleges like yours leave with no work experience. As an organisation, it is focused on that particular issue. I find some of the conversations with it fascinating, and you are directly in line with what it has been telling me privately, as an MLA, not through the Committee. It is a major challenge.

Equally, when I reflect back, I wish someone had told me where the gaps were in Northern Ireland, because, for instance, if all of us in the room said that we wanted to be a solicitor but there was no demand for solicitors, not all of us would get jobs. However, if someone said that there was a huge need for engineers or a lot of opportunities in ICT or finance, that is where you would probably look if you thought that there was going to be an outcome that would benefit you and your future. I have found that a lot of people at even my age are now saying that they wished they had been informed back then and probably would not have taken the course that they did, in direction or otherwise.

Pádraig has joined us just as I was buying time. I was keeping us north-west people on side.

Mr Delargy: Hopefully, you can hear me now.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes.

Mr Delargy: Thanks very much for your presentation. It was really interesting. As you can imagine, a lot of the questions that I was going to ask have been asked, and fair play to you all for coming in with your answers. They were really good, as was your presentation.

We are bringing a motion to the Assembly next week on the funding model for sixth forms and the pathways that that opens up for young people to go on to further education, higher education or to remain at school, so your presentation is timely. I have two questions. First, do you hope to open the survey to other pupils who are maybe at school or have left school? Are there any plans to do that? It is a brilliant survey, and it would be great to see it receive even more responses.

Ms Brennan-Collins: I will need to speak to Claire and Lucy, but I am sure that they will be happy to send the survey to other schools, because that would be useful for us and for everyone else.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We second that. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Brennan-Collins: We do loads of surveys.

Mr Delargy: It is obvious that you have done a huge amount of work on it, and it would be good to get the opinion of others right across as well, so well done on that.

I am an MLA in Derry, and the Foyle Learning Community is here. Do you have models like that in your areas? There are quite a number of grammar and secondary schools here, and, if one subject was not offered at a school, pupils might do it at another school. For example, if history was not available at school A, you might do it at school B. Is that something that you find in all your areas or in just some?

Mr Brown: I have heard of people doing that in the area where I go to school. I have never met anyone who has done it. What is more common in that area is people moving school altogether, say from one grammar school to another or from a secondary school to a grammar school, whether that be for subject variety or because they have become more academic and want to go to a different school now that they can. I have heard of people doing it, but it seems to be a rare in my area.

Ms Brennan-Collins: I go to St Dominic's Grammar School, and we are right beside All Saints College, and I see some All Saints students coming to our school to learn subjects that maybe All Saints does not offer. They go back and forth between the schools because we are quite close.

Ms Girvan: In my school, it happens if there are courses that people want to do. Pupils from other schools come to our school or pupils from our school go to the other school if there are not enough doing a subject so that then makes a class.

Mr Delargy: Very good. So, that is done more broadly. If a subject was not offered in your school but might be offered in another school, would having to travel put you off doing it?

Mr Brown: I do not think that it would. If I was passionate about a subject, especially for A level, I would definitely travel as long as it was not an absurd distance.

Ms Brennan-Collins: It would put me off. I have been at my school for five years, and the thought of going away again to a completely different school, maybe without any of my friends or people I know, would definitely put me off.

Ms Girvan: It would put me off as well, because it would be very daunting. I could just do another subject in my own school and spend more time studying it, instead of having to travel to the other school just to do the different one.

Mr Delargy: Thank you very much for your answers and your presentation today. They have been really informative.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Members, thanks for all the questions. Does the C&AG have anything to add? No.

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): I have a quick challenge, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Stuart is the Treasury Officer of Accounts.

Mr Stevenson: I work in the Department of Finance.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): He keeps us all right.

Mr Stevenson: In public services, as a "thank you" for a good job, you normally get another job. In that spirit, I say that the Executive draft Budget is out for consultation at the minute. Based on the way in which you folks researched your evidence, delivered it today and dealt with questions, we would like to hear from you. We would like to hear your opinions on our priorities, what we spend money on, and what we do not. It is online. There are about six fields. It is open for about another three weeks. I encourage you to say to your colleagues in the Youth Assembly that we want to hear from you. It would be great.

Those are my words of thanks and my challenge to the witnesses.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You could end up with jobs out of it.

Mr Kerr: Correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that we have already engaged in something with your Department in that respect. I think that there have been some developments since then, but I am sure that we would be happy to follow that up.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Harrison, you would make a great politician. *[Laughter.]* I thank each of you — Bláthnaid, Harrison, Rory and Paige — for attending, for taking our questions, for being very honest and forthright about where the challenges exist, and also for the engagement with the

Deputy Chair last week; her feedback was that the session was very positive. We are very fortunate to have such great young people in the Youth Assembly, very ably supported by a fantastic team. I am glad that you are giving it plenty of work to do. I thank all of you. I also thank you, Stuart, for being with us today, and thanks to the Audit Office for its work.