



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Briefing:
Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education

29 January 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Weir	Minister of Education
Mr Derek Baker	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I warmly welcome the Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA, and the permanent secretary, Derek Baker, to the second meeting of the Committee for Education. It has been almost three years to the day since we were at this place, facing each other. I am glad that we are able to welcome you back. There are, obviously, a wide range of serious challenges facing education to which we need to respond urgently and decisively. We look forward to hearing your opening statement today, after which we will take questions from Committee members.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Chair. I was watching a programme last night about Europe in which Tony Blair was being interviewed. They were contrasting his honeymoon period after coming into office, when he became associated with the phrase, "Education, education, education". The parallel here is that we are coming in with a certain level of good spirit and good faith, which probably means that, in about six months' time, half of you will hate the sight of me *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Six months? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Six months. Well, there is a spirit of optimism, so I am pushing the boat out on that time frame.

First, I welcome the opportunity to appear in front of the Committee so early. Obviously, the original intention was to be here last week, but the Executive awayday put paid to that. From that point of view also, I and the Department would be very open to whatever is being sought with regard to appearances. I know that, after this session with me and the permanent secretary, you will have some

senior officials who will be able to drill down on some of the detailed issues on which they have particular expertise and experience. It is also the case that any papers or information that you may need we will be happy to facilitate. The only thing I would say is that the more notice we get to provide papers, the easier it is to supply those.

Commonly, we share a view of the importance of education, not just in the Northern Ireland Government but for everyone in Northern Ireland. While we can highlight the positive impact that good education has on communities and on society and it is obviously a key driver of the economy, to my mind, the most important thing about education is the impact on the individual. Education can be the great life enabler, the great game changer for an individual. That should be our key focus. The Programme for Government talks about ensuring that every child is given the best possible start in life. There are important elements of detail, and there will be big issues that, collectively, we will tackle, from teachers' pay to school finance — a myriad of issues. In one sense, however, we should remember that all the issues are, ultimately, a means to an end, which is to provide support for our young people.

I know you have had a briefing on this, but the Department has a wide range of responsibilities within its scope. The focus is always clearly, particularly in the public's mind, on the school system. We run mainstream schools for pupils up to the age of 18 and special education provision up to the age of 19, but we should also remember that, within that scope of responsibilities, since the changes of four or five years ago, the Department is responsible for early years education, the youth side of things and childcare provision. We will work alongside others. It is about getting the full scene.

I want to briefly touch on the issues that are coming up. It is hard, because the elephant in the room, particularly on the big issues that face us, is resources. Depending on where we end up with resources, the situation could be quite manageable and doable, or we could be in very tough territory. It all depends on the level of resources.

I know Philip Irwin and John Smith will address the Committee later about the school situation. I want to touch on the issue of capital funding before I move on to resources and recurrent resources. There is no doubt that, if there was unlimited capability and unlimited money, the capital budget could be spent two or three times over. However, broadly speaking, compared with the pressures on the recurrent budget, the capital budget is in a better position. This year, the capital budget for mainstream spending is £157 million, and there is the ongoing issue of Fresh Start money for integrated and shared campuses.

There can be considerable confidence that the main capital budget will move along at, probably, at least a similar pace. I suspect, given what is being said nationally about infrastructure, that the Prime Minister is likely to embrace higher levels of spend on capital projects, which will have some level of knock-on effect for us. There are limitations in Northern Ireland about precisely what can be spent, because you are dependent on various professional bodies providing development plans and construction. There is a little bit of a natural limit.

We are fairly confident that, while we can always spend more money, we will be able to provide a flow of capital projects. It is to our advantage that, with our main capital budget, where it is unrestricted, we have always drawn down what we have asked for and been able to spend it, and we have a mix of capital projects. We will make a call on the major capital works projects at some stage. There is also the school enhancement project, which we saw a few weeks ago and which has been very successful in a range of schools, and it has the advantage that it can be delivered more quickly than the major capital programme. There is also the minor works programme. To some extent, if there are any problems in the system with spending, there can be a little bit of switching about from year to year with the various programmes. Therefore, we are in a good position to absorb the capital money. If the Executive decide to put more money into education capital projects, we need to make sure that we spend it very strategically. Yes, more could be spent, but the pressures may be less than those on the broader resource side.

I want to touch on four major issues effecting the resource side. First, in recent years, there has been considerable pressure on school budgets. Generally, if we compare the budget with the historic spending high point in 2010-11, we have, in real terms, about a £230 million gap if we had kept pace with inflation. We are in a situation where, in recent years, schools have worn hair shirts. They have made cuts, and, despite that, it has been highlighted clearly by schools that, even doing that, they are not in a position to make ends meet. As a result, in the last number of years, we have seen the drawdown in terms of deficits increasing and surpluses coming down. There has tended to be an overspend of £20 million, £30 million or more. Essentially, schools are not able to cope within their

budgets. The purpose of the monitoring round will be to apply a bit of money to try to ensure —. Essentially, that money is paying salaries for teachers.

The other thing that schools have a difficulty with is that they have a limited room for manoeuvre, in that, roughly speaking, 80%-plus of their budget will go directly on teachers' salaries — well over 90% goes on general salaries. They do not have many ways to make savings in the school without, ultimately, leading to some form of redundancies. That is something we do not want to see.

Although we do not have the final figure, we anticipate that the amount of expenditure beyond what was allocated in the aggregated schools budget (ASB) will be greater this year than it has been in previous years. Even if we get a generous Budget settlement, that will not be solved overnight. It is a question of starting to close the gap. That is one critical issue.

Obviously, something which is very much in people's minds and is another key priority is pay and conditions, particularly the teachers' pay settlement. Where we are with that has been fairly well publicly documented. From the summer of last year, there has been an agreement between management side and teacher unions on the period between 2017 and 2019, to take things up to 1 September. There is a case that has been put to the Department of Finance. To use a Boris-ism, we have an "oven-ready deal". To be fair, this is not through any lack of desire on the part of the Department of Finance; the key factor is securing the funding for that, particularly as the bulk of that money will impact on baselines. It is not just a question of getting a one-off amount of money; it is how that will impact and getting security for it. I am focused on trying to resolve that issue; indeed, I will meet the unions this afternoon.

I should say, because it is not always realised, that that deal goes beyond the simple issue of pay. Part of the agreement is to have work streams on issues such as the workload that teachers face; administration; inspection; issues around the cost of substitutes, on which there may be opportunities to make changes; and flexibility in the movement of staff where there are redundancies. There is a range of issues, some of which will virtuous results if we can resolve them.

While we are talking about pay, the focus has been on a pay settlement to end industrial action. One of the major pressures in the system arises because we are talking about an agreement to cover the 2017-19 period. If we are looking at the period in-year up to 2021, on teacher pay, ultimately we are looking at what can be done effectively over — what is it? — more or less a three-and-a-half-year period. That means that, in terms of the overall uplift, there are some major issues to be decided. The final point I will make about pay is that, while the focus is always on teacher pay, an area where the Department has not a great deal of discretion is non-teacher pay. A lot of that is decided by way of national settlements through the National Joint Council (NJC). They have tended to be at a higher rate than inflation in recent years, but, if there is a national agreement to increase the pay of particular classes of workers, who are often relatively low-paid to start with, there is no variation that the Department can make, either up or down.

The third issue strategically is special needs. There are two things to highlight in connection with that. For a range of reasons, often virtuous, we have seen a growing number of pupils who, it has been realised, will have some form of special needs. About 18,000 cases have been stated. There is a vicious cycle at present. In recent years, because of those increasing numbers each year, we have seen a fairly rapid rise in budgetary pressures in that area. My sense of things is that that is not accompanied by a belief from parents that things are necessarily getting better. We need to see what we can do to improve that situation. There has been an overhang in the past number of years about going out to make a bit of a step change in special educational needs. Roughly five years ago, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill went through the Assembly under John O'Dowd. Arising from that were regulations that needed to pass through the Assembly and a code of practice, and that would provide a support framework and make changes and put those into effect. Those were cleared, I think, with departmental solicitors round about December. They are ready, I think, to go out for consultation fairly soon. I highlight, however, that, when those are put into place, they will create additional responsibilities and pressures for schools, to the extent that additional funding will be required to enable schools to cope with them.

The fourth point around big-ticket items relates to childcare. Part of that is a commitment to expand the childcare provision. Northern Ireland has the lowest level of free childcare provision in the year before school. There are different models, one of which will be put as a proposal to the Executive, to expand that up to a 30-hour provision. I should say that, while the focus is always on the 30 hours for the year below school, there are implications for school-age children and Bright Start, with some of the issues around younger children. I caution, however, that all of the items I have mentioned are costly,

big-ticket items. The other issue I am conscious of with childcare is that, whatever the model, it will lead to considerable expansion, particularly in the number of hours of nursery provision across the board that can be made. Leaving aside the finance, there will be a need to build up capacity in the sector. Therefore, even if this were, for the sake of argument, put to the Executive next week and agreed, it would take a reasonable period to build up to that point, and there would, therefore, be issues around parental expectation.

Allied with resources is a level of reform, because there is an interlink. Specifically in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document are two aspects in which there is particular focus on reform. One is a commission that will look at an overall reform of the system, particularly to drive effectiveness and efficiency; and the second is specifically targeted at underachievement. We have advantages: the two commissions will not be a big-ticket item in terms of cost; and we are not starting from a point of zero in either area. Down the years, there has been a number of reports on underachievement. I suppose there will be a focus, when we get to the point, on how we can implement things and how we can produce best practice. There are a lot of good things happening on underachievement, particularly in early years education. One of the things that we found very successful within schools was the nurture units.

Similarly, on the broader issue of reform, the Department, while, obviously, there has been a major restriction on policy context in the absence of devolution, is engaged with the Education Authority (EA) and other organisations on a range of work streams that have looked at transformation and is gradually building up information around that. There are a number of issues, such as how to provide a more cohesive system in schools. There is obviously a need, without prejudging any of the solutions in that, to turbocharge area planning. To be fair, one of the advantages has been that the permanent secretary has been able to take development decisions, but the development proposals coming down the pipeline have been limited. We need to see that moving more quickly. There are also issues around the mixture of the workforce and how we have best intervention. There is a range of things for those bodies, and I will look to bring forward proposals, first to the Executive and then wider. The only issue I would put as a bit of a caveat is that it is important that reform moves alongside finance. Reform in and of itself is not the golden ticket to solve our financial difficulties. A lot of the reforms that are needed, even around area planning, will be less about massive amounts that are saved and more about improving the quality of education. That is particularly true with area planning.

If we look at the broader level of efficiency, we see that there are things that can be done more efficiently and provision that could be made. We have at the moment, including nursery, about 340,000 pupils in the school system. That is roughly 17,000 more than a few years ago; indeed, next year those figures are due to increase yet again. Demographics have increased them to that level. We have roughly 18,500 full-time equivalent teachers. Even if we move to become more efficient, it is unrealistic to say that we will see a massive difference in the number of teachers. We still need a large number of teachers. Even when we see that virtuous things can happen, the nature of education means it will take time and sometimes require legislative provision to turn some things around.

The final point I want to touch on is there is a recognition that is critical in any form of joined-up government that a number of the challenges that we face will require cross-sectoral solutions, principally if we look at areas around how we ensure that we get the best out of early years. There is a clear crossover with health. A lot of the difficulties that we have around underachievement happen even before the child gets through the school gates. As health visitors are the principal point of contact for most families, work needs to be done with the Department of Health in relation to that. We are working to ensure, particularly with the Children's Services Co-operation Act, that that filters down to grass roots level and is not just decided at a higher level. Similarly, there are also cross-sectoral issues with Health on SEN and mental health. It is important to note that, while there are vital issues around children's mental health, there is also work to be done for the staff in schools; indeed, they will face, as we have seen, stresses, particularly in areas such as the challenge of suicide. We have to realise that that has a major impact on the wider school community, so people cannot be ignored on that side of things.

Finally, in terms of cross-sectoral issues that I want to highlight, there is a key job of work, on which some background work has been done, between ourselves and Department for the Economy to ensure that we have a 14-19 strategy that is fit for purpose. Part of that will involve the interaction between, in particular, sixth form centres, what schools provide and what is there in terms of further and higher education. There is not always that match of opportunities. Sometimes, that is driven by choice, but whether students are always in the location that is best for them in terms of the pathway that they can take is something we need to examine.

That is just a run-through of a number of the issues. I am sure that there will be many and varied questions, and, if there is anything too difficult, I will pass it over to the permanent secretary [Laughter.] I see him glancing behind him to see which officials he can then delegate it to later. I know that you pursue items of detail with some other officials at a later stage. I am open to whatever you want to ask.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much, Minister. It is important to have you back in position, and we welcome that. A lot of the issues that you have set out are consistent with the initial key priorities in the forward work programme that the Committee has set.

If we can get serious for this part of the exchange and our questions, you have rightly acknowledged there are many serious challenges facing education. You referred to our teaching and non-teaching staff having been on industrial action for a number of years, and achieving fair pay and conditions for teaching and non-teaching staff will be an absolute priority for the Committee. You mentioned special educational needs provision, which, as we know, is failing to meet the needs of too many children. It is also failing to provide teachers with the support that they need, to the extent that we have had problems up to and including allegations of the use of inappropriate restraint and seclusion on occasion.

As you mentioned, many school budgets are at breaking point. I understand that the Department of Education itself is overspent. The Education Authority has declared a financial crisis in education, and assessments of the cost of separation in education continue to be up to approximately £100 million each year. We also continue to have an approach to post-primary transfer that is consistently challenged by much academic research. Yet, we have an area-planning process that is failing to deliver reform at the pace necessary to deliver a more sustainable and integrated education system. All of that is happening to the extent that the outgoing Education Authority CEO said, over two years ago, that without radical investment and radical reform, our education system could be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century.

My first question, Minister, is this: what specific radical reforms and radical investment will you action to respond to this crisis?

Mr Weir: I will deal with a few of those points. First, on a point of clarification, teaching staff have been taking industrial action; non-teaching staff have not. Whether there is a little occasional impact on that side, I do not know. In particular, although many non-teaching staff are in low-paid jobs, their pay increase tended to be around 4% in a number of the years. Consequently, there is not the same problem. Clearly, however, we want to deal with the industrial action.

You asked about being radical. I will deal first with the finance side. There needs to be a step change. It is difficult to quantify it precisely, but we estimate that an increase of several hundred million — maybe somewhere in the region of at least £300 million to £400 million — in the budget will be needed. You are asking what I can do about that. Principally, the key is getting additional finance in via the Executive. To my mind, the issue is that, be it through the mention of packages or Barnett consequential, the overall Executive Budget, even taking the most pessimistic view, will have a considerable increase next year. The issue is that all Departments are seeking well beyond what is, potentially, there, so it is about how much of that cake we get.

I mentioned the four big-ticket items. We estimate that roughly £150 million might be needed to cover all the aspects of pay, not just the one settlement but the potential settlements for 2019-2020 and 2020-21 on the non-teaching side. You might be looking, across the board, at about £75 million for special needs. Essentially, to get school budgets to a point where the head is above water, ideally, we would probably need at least £50 million or £60 million.

Although there will be no impact in year 1, a move to 30 hours' childcare, you would probably be talking about anywhere from £40 million to £90 million a year, depending on which formula you go for. There is a range of variables in the models used. The only caveat on childcare is that it would be impossible to spend that sort of money in year 1, so you are looking at a more modest figure.

All those are big-ticket items, and, realistically, whatever the changes that can be made, they would not come close to easing the pressures in the Department. You could make all the reforms in the world and not come anywhere close to filling that size of gap.

Reforms were mentioned, and a lot of the things that need to be done are, in the broadest sense, on many occasions, already being done. Some transformations are in hand. However, it is also about

ratcheting those up. Area planning, has been, at times, too slow a process. There has maybe been sensitivity around making difficult decisions, the end result being that the flow of activity in area planning has not been as swift as it should. There has been a lack of cohesion among the different sectors. We need, at the very least, a much more joined-up approach from the different sectors in the school estate.

We can debate the figures on separation. Often, when it comes to the efficiency of provision, there is divided provision among different sectors in an area. Possibly, from an overall or global point of view, the bigger problem, quite often, is over-provision in a sector in a particular area, where a number of schools are very close to one another. However, as with all those things, that will not, in and of itself, make a big cost saving. Some of that is more about the quality of education.

Often, a post-primary school that is too small is not able to provide the breadth of subjects, particularly at GCSE, to give every possible opportunity to its pupils. Similarly, for some very small primary schools, although there is evidence that there is very little difference between a composite class and a single class over two years or a single year, once you move beyond that into a three-year composite class, there is a potential detriment to the level of education provided.

It is about a cocktail of measures. I am conscious of the fact that an independent commission will be tasked to be part of that. Although, for a lot of us in education, the direction of travel on a range of those things may well be fairly obvious, I cannot circumscribe what that will produce. I cannot produce the solution before I have set up the commission to look at that. Those are the type of areas that we have. I know that you raised other issues about broad sustainability. I am happy to pick up on any specifics that I missed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Those are significant figures on the extent of the finance needed to respond to the actions that you want to take to improve our education system. There is a concerning lack of detail on what reform action can be taken by the Department.

Mr Weir: I will give you just one example. Things can be done that will impact, potentially, on workplace planning. The caveat to that is that things can be put in that will, for instance, create more flexibility of movement for teachers when there are redundancies. The high cost of substitution cover can be reduced as well. Some of those things will require regulations. There needs to be the ability to bring those through to have any impact at all before, say, the autumn or 2021 at the earliest. On the broad impact on finance, a range of things can and will be done, and I will be as imaginative as possible. If people think that there will be quick-fix solutions or quick-fix impacts, we, collectively, need to make sure that there is a bit of realism.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We can come back to those figures and the actions that are needed. You did, to be fair to you, mention the independent review of education. Can you give a timescale for when you foresee implementing that?

Mr Weir: I think that you'll be looking at something happening fairly quickly. I want to give a little thought to precisely how that is set up. Terms of reference will be brought to the Executive within the next few months. There is no reason to delay. Where reforms can happen, and where anything can, at least, be started before that body concludes its work, it is not a question of those of us in the system waiting, necessarily, on every response from the commission. On area planning, for instance, it is clear that a step change in speed is needed. It will not be a question of things being put on hold until we get that. Where things can and should happen, action will be taken to progress those as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have two very short, specific questions for you, Minister. I mentioned that teacher pay and conditions will be an obvious priority for the Committee, as will special educational needs provision. Can you give us clarity on the status of the business case for the teacher pay and conditions settlement? Has that been approved? Indeed, has the amount of finance needed been approved? Where will that finance will come from?

Mr Weir: Directly speaking, the business case has been submitted to the Department of Finance. I praise all of those involved with the discussions, both the management side and the trade union side. I think that what is there is a reasonable compromise. The one barrier is, essentially, the money being available. There are no particular difficulties with the business case, per se. Very specifically, there is a gap of about £68 million, but there are two other aspects to the overall pay bill. There will be where we reach, and there will need to be discussions that cover the post-2019 period and whatever is put in

place financially for teachers. There will also be the costs, particularly for 2021, for the non-teaching side. The estimate is that it will take the vast bulk of that £68 million. Some other money has been set aside. We estimate that the overall cost for the teachers is a little over £100 million. Some accrued money is kind of waiting and can be applied to that. Of that £100 million, roughly half will end up being, effectively, baselined; half is, largely speaking, back pay. However, there is no point in being able to announce that we have reached a settlement until the money is there to pay for it. It is not a question of a one-off payment; it is about getting the assurance that this will be baselined for future years.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am conscious that I need to get to members' questions, but the key question is this: where is that money coming from? Is it coming quickly enough that you will be able to avoid any further escalation of industrial action such as strike action?

Mr Weir: The scale of those changes means that the money can come only from an increase in the Department's budget. That will stand or fall on the budgetary settlement, particularly for 2021. The timescale from the Department of Finance is that the Minister will probably present a Budget towards the end of February. That will be critical, and there will be discussions on the needs of Departments over the next few weeks. This has already been discussed, at the broadest level, at the Executive awayday. Ultimately, it can come only externally. This will also unlock some of the work that will be able to be done on the work streams. That is the sort of figure that cannot be generated internally. Certain imaginative things can make small contributions, but that scale of money can come only by way of an external increase to the Department's budget. An indication of the situation across the board in education is that we have been hit by national issues with pensions and National Insurance contributions. The education budget is more salary-driven and more human-driven than any other Department in Northern Ireland. Around 80% of costs come from that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We understand that, Minister. You say it has to come externally, so what exactly is being done to access that finance externally?

Mr Weir: The finance externally will be the Executive agreeing on a Budget and agreeing on a budget for the Department of Education. With all of the considerations about how we deal with the challenges, I can be as imaginative as possible. Hitting the big challenges can be done only if there is a considerable additional uplift in the budget. I cannot allocate money that simply is not there.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am keen to bring in other members, Minister. Thank you for your answers so far.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for coming. Minister, we all agree that the importance of education really cannot be overestimated. Indeed, as you referred to, it is not just about attendance at school. The implications are that education has a huge impact on the future of our young people, families and communities. You referred to the impact on the economy as well. Indeed, you have given a very broad outline of your ministerial responsibilities.

You referred to the need for reform and legislation. You also indicated that you were not in the business of seeking quick-fix solutions. Will you outline which aspects of primary and secondary legislation you will consider further?

Mr Weir: I need to seek advice, and that will arise from the advice. One example is that, if there are changes to substitute teacher costs, and there may well be flexibility in other issues as well, the advice will be that certain things that could be done will require regulations or legislation, and some will not. Sometimes, issues that are not obvious to the public will have a major impact on the school system. To be fair, I know that long before I was involved with the Committee, it produced a report on inspection. I think that there is a need for change in the way in which inspection is done. We need to move towards inspection having much more focus on being an improvements agency. Inspectors have done a great job down the years, and they have, quite often, been blamed for industrial action, but we need to move to a situation in which there is greater trust among the teaching workforce and schools. That will, if you like, change the emphasis of inspection. That will not necessarily lead to headlines, but it will have significant impact.

Similarly, on workload and administration, we need to burrow down to ensure that there is no duplication. Sometimes, it is more a question of miscommunication. What schools expect that they have to produce might not match what is being asked for, so clarification is needed. We need to drill down. It is about a range of things of that nature. Some are simply actions that could be taken; some will need legislative underpinning. Clearly, for instance, providing better SEN provision requires SEN

regulations to be put in place, but it also requires additional resources as part of the framework. Those issues go hand in hand.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister and permanent secretary, for coming along. You are very welcome. We have only a short time today and there is so much to get through, but we want to cover the priority pressure areas. I want to take you back to the teachers' industrial action. You touched on inspection. The ETI and the manner in which it operates is of concern to many unions. What changes will you consider making as part of the resolution to industrial action? Do those changes relate to the findings of the inquiry that was carried out by the Education Committee in 2014?

Mr Weir: There are implications. The Education Committee did a lot of good work. I can praise the Committee because I was not a member at that stage, so it is certainly no self-recommendation. Inspection is clearly one of the work streams, but, on a broader level, there has been concern that inspection was, on one level, the easy area to have a go at during industrial action. We need to ensure that inspection is embedded in the system. However, I believe that we need to move to a situation in which the provision of inspection is a little more light touch and focuses on a move towards a Northern Ireland improvement service, or whatever the exact title was in the Committee's recommendations. That is the level of refocusing needed. To be perfectly honest, I think that those are sensible moves. For instance, if we are looking for data to be produced for inspection, we, at least, ensure, either by clarification or change, that it is nothing over and above what is, more or less, generated generally, so that there is no additional pressure. Quite often, that has happened due to misunderstanding, to be perfectly honest. It is around those sorts of issues that we need to look at how we can restructure that side of things in order to have a more cooperative relationship between schools and the inspectorate. To be perfectly honest, even if there were no industrial action, we would need to do that anyway.

Mr Derek Baker (Department of Education): May I add a point, please, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, certainly.

Mr Baker: I just want to clarify a point on the potential pay settlement. For the benefit of the Committee: management side and the teachers' unions reached agreement in principle on a deal. Even if we were to get the money today, the teaching unions would need to put that to their members for ratification. So, it's not quite a done deal.

I will expand on the Minister's point. You are probably aware that, as part of that in-principle agreement, we have identified a number of work streams. Some of those focus explicitly on school governance arrangements, which include inspection and workloads for teachers and principals. I would like to make this point: sometimes a bit of myth-busting needs to be done around inspection, because the vast majority of inspection outcomes are very positive for schools. Through the discussions on industrial action, there has been really good engagement between the teaching unions and the chief inspector. For the benefit of the Committee: if you do not already know, the chief inspector has announced her intention to retire later this year, so a competition will be launched very soon for a new chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): May I ask you a brief supplementary to that, Derek? You mention the need to get teaching union support and sign-off on any deal. I asked this previously but am not sure that I got an answer: to what extent are you concerned about how quickly this in-principle agreement needs to be financed and agreed before that goodwill becomes very difficult to retain?

Mr Weir: Clearly, in one sense, things have been stretched longer than is ideal, but, if we are in a position to sign off on something, it has to be on the basis of a firm foundation. As I said, I will meet representatives of the five unions later today. Good work has been done between the Department and the unions, so that goodwill is still there.

If we reach a point at which there is an adequate budget settlement, that is a shorter time frame. It may take the unions a month or two; that is one of the issues that I want to clarify with them. If we reach a point at which there is an agreement that can be implemented, for them to get a formal sign-off from their members will require balloting, and we need to check the timescale for that.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, welcome, and congratulations on your reappointment to the post. Also, although I have mentioned the permanent secretary in the Chamber, thanks to Derek Baker, who has been a fantastic help on many issues in the absence of the Assembly over recent years.

There are huge challenges, Minister, and you mentioned a few of them. We could go into detail, but our time on these matters is limited. However, one in particular that I would like to flag up is the concern about the Education Authority. In all the schools that I have visited across my constituency of West Tyrone, and in those that I have engaged with beyond my constituency, there is a clear theme that the Education Authority is not fit for purpose in the eyes of teachers, principals, parents and the public. There are clear examples of why that is the case. Recently, a principal came out and said that it was in complete meltdown; that she could not get any support for staff or pupils in specific cases that she had written to the Education Authority about; and that, in the absence of these institutions, it has mishandled special education needs forms that were not date-stamped. That, apparently, was a direction from the Education Authority.

What is the Minister's intention in relation to handling these matters in the Education Authority, given that it came into operation only on 1 April 2015? As far as I can see, there is no confidence in the body from teachers or the public. It needs major reform and, certainly, direct intervention from the Minister in how it is run.

Mr Weir: Of that range of issues, I will take SEN first. As a result of concerns raised, an internal audit has taken place. That is due to come to a conclusion very swiftly. While, in one sense, a certain amount of internal work has to be done by the EA in the direct handling of these issues, the key element is to try to ensure that we get proper provision and protection for the most vulnerable children. I will look at that very closely. Problems have occurred, but, to be fair to the EA, in terms of the level of support, it has, to a certain extent, also been a victim of the overall financial situation. Successive Ministers and the Department have looked at where not enough money has been provided, and the first emphasis has been on trying, as much as possible, to protect school budgets. That has meant that the EA has, to be fair, taken a disproportionate hit. One of the by-products of that is that it is in a little bit of a vicious circle, in that it is not able to provide the level of support. I will be looking at what aspects are there. There have been difficulties, but there is an onus on the EA, financially and in terms of what it provides, to ensure that it gets its house in order. My officials have been working with the EA over the last few years, particularly on the financial aspects, but we need to move beyond whatever has happened by way of the teething problems to try to ensure that. There is no doubt, to be fair, that it has been somewhat hamstrung by the lack of finances as well.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister, for the answer to the question. There are major financial challenges in all the Departments, and there are, absolutely, major financial challenges in your Department. That has had a knock-on effect, but it does not justify the absence of simple communication between the Education Authority and a principal of a school, who is desperate for some support, advice or guidance on very delicate matters. That is not an issue in isolation. There have been many examples, Minister. I suggest that the Department, at a very serious level, quickly addresses the lack of communication between schools and the Education Authority, particularly when a teacher, who, obviously, would have tried or exercised every possible avenue to deal with that situation, resorted to calling the Education Authority for advice.

Mr Weir: We will raise that directly with the EA, Daniel. We will be meeting the chair and chief executive fairly soon on that.

Mr Baker: I will add one point, Chair. We sometimes hear these stories, too. People say it about the Department as well, so we are not immune. I reinforce the point that the Education Authority had a very difficult birth. It went on for far too long, and five education and library boards were seriously debilitated before they came into one organisation. I know that the Committee has asked for a paper on transformation. One of the work streams in that is about services provided to schools, primarily by the Education Authority. There are a number of projects in there to improve the quality of services to schools. I know that the authority is looking at that: what services do we provide; how efficient are they; and, more importantly, how effective and responsive are they?

We also have a project looking at the whole SEN approach, not through our eyes or a bureaucrat's eyes but through the parents' eyes and the child's eyes. We are on the case with the Education Authority, and it is very *[Inaudible.]* We have even given it some modest resources, within the constraints that we operate, from the transformation moneys to look at the quality of services that it is providing to schools, so that we do not get those kinds of complaints from schools that they feel abandoned.

I have a lot of sympathy with the Education Authority. It is dealing with very difficult issues under massive resource constraints, and we are engaging with it. I accept the point you make. We get those complaints, too. We have to address them, together with the authority.

Mr Humphrey: Congratulations, Peter, on your position, and I look forward to working with you in your new role. I know that you will bring a huge amount of energy and expertise to the post. I, too, pay tribute to Derek and the team for the job that they did in the absence of Ministers. I thank him, because, at times, I was in his ear complaining about some issues, and I must say that he was, on most occasions, responsive and positive in being responsive.

Mr Weir: Maybe the times when he was not responsive are the ones when you should not have got the right answer. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Humphrey: I also reinforce the point about the Education Authority. I was at a chair of governors meeting last night at the Girls' Model, and I, too, share some concerns. I know that you and I have spoken, and we were in a meeting with the EA in the summer, in your role then as party education spokesman. I appreciate the pressures that it may be under, Derek, but the principals are on the front line on this issue and are acutely under pressure in the schools on some issues. Frankly, there is no excuse for the EA simply refusing to deal with, respond or communicate with principals. Then, when public representatives get involved, as I have had to do on a number of occasions, it has simply refused to respond to them either. It exacerbates the problem and leads to greater frustration, and it cannot continue.

Minister, will you give the Committee some advice on the New Decade, New Approach deal? There is a plan to establish an expert group to deal with the linkages between the persistent problem of educational underachievement and socio-economic background, particularly regarding young Protestant boys. Equally, young Catholic boys are only a few percentages behind, although there are a greater number. As someone who represents North Belfast, this is a huge issue. What is your plan for that?

Mr Weir: A group will be established. To some extent, a lot of the research has already been done because different reports have been produced on it. A lot of the focus will be on how we can implement and apply proper change. For instance, reference is consistently made to the transfer test. The biggest issue across the board in terms of underachievement is investment in early years. For instance, we have seen the piloting of nurture units, which have been very helpful. There are issues around Learning to Learn, which, again, is part of the transformation work streams.

There are a lot of successes in the education system. At one level, it is true that, in both communities, fewer than 1% of pupils end up with no qualifications at all, but we are getting pockets of high levels of underachievement. We need to try to drill down into what actions can be taken. We need to look at interventions. It is also critical to look at how we specifically target things at boys, because you are right that there is a gap. It is not unique to Northern Ireland. There is a wider problem on the gender side with underachievement being particularly amongst males. We need to look at some specific measures in relation to that.

On both sides of the divide, in different parts of north Belfast and west Belfast, it is critical to make collaborative efforts and, particularly, to have community buy-in and to harness that. I have seen that in the Shankill. I have seen it in some projects in west Belfast, and I have seen it with school principals in north Belfast. When you get that broader buy-in to education across the whole community, you can start to produce results.

As politicians, we are always accused of short-termism. As Robin put it, we are looking for the quick fix. Sometimes, it is what will impact in a year or two years' time. To be fair, some of the investments and changes made by previous Education Ministers may take 10 or 15 years to show up. If you make an intervention that improves educational opportunities for two-year-olds, that will show up in GCSEs 14 years down the line. Simply the fact that there is not an instant win should not in any way deter any of us from doing that. We need to take the cradle-to-graduation approach.

Mr Baker: I will add a point. Moving from the strategic to the very specific, some members may be aware of the major international benchmarking studies that go on, PISA, published just before Christmas. It found, right across the world, that we have the same link between economic disadvantage and educational underachievement. We are not unique. In fact, the problem here is not as acute in other areas, and it might be interesting for the Committee to get a briefing on that.

Again, Mr Humphrey, you will be more aware than most of really imaginative stuff being done on a shoestring by primary school principals in north Belfast. Specifically, we managed to beg, steal and borrow a bit of money from the Department of Justice. We are doing it in east Belfast too. There are some really good initiatives, at a low level, which will invest for the future.

There is lots of stuff going on: targeting social need; extended schools. We need to step back. We need to figure out what is working and what is not in nurture units and come up with a coherent strategy.

Mr Weir: Good things are happening in Northern Ireland, by way of best practice. Part of it is also how we roll out best practice; how we share that information. I note, for instance, that the Department has produced an internal report on underachievement in a number of schools and the actions that are being taken. One of the steps on completion is to share that on the Department's website so that everybody can get access to the actions that have been taken, and that is about ensuring best practice actions. None of us in Northern Ireland should be so proud that, where we see that a good initiative has happened elsewhere, we cannot replicate that. Quite often, those things are done without a large financial cost; it is about the way that they are done. That is critical as well.

Mr Humphrey: May I ask, then —?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Before I bring you back in again, William: I realise that the Minister's time is limited and we have four more questions to get in.

Mr Weir: I am happy to stay until all the questions are asked.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is very gracious, thank you. I will bring you back in, William, before we move on.

Mr Humphrey: Thanks, Chair. I want to ask about the expert group. I know it is early days and you are only just in post, but do you have any idea of when the group will be established?

Mr Weir: Again, as with both groups, I will be looking at that over the next few months. I want to take time for a wee bit of thought and consultation with a few people. Both of those groups will get one bite at this, so I want to make sure that we get it right. There are people with particular levels of expertise who may not be directly involved with the groups but may be able to give advice.

Mr Humphrey: The key to that, Minister, is getting people who are closer to the situation — not exclusively so, but so that they have a key role in that group of experts. For example, the Committee unanimously agreed last week that one of the major challenges facing young people in our community — although not solely young people — is the issue of mental health, suicide awareness and general well-being. The Committee agreed to have a joint meeting with the Committee for Health.

I have mentioned to Mr Baker that one of the essential things in this is that there is a joined-up approach across government between the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Department for Communities, Belfast City Council — in my case — and local government in general to take it forward, so that there is a multi-agency approach to tackle the issue, which is a pandemic across the community. It is particularly acute in north and west Belfast, as you will be aware, and we need to address that.

Mr Weir: That is undoubtedly the case. Cross-departmental working will be critical, particularly as regards mental health. It is important, in terms of the commissions but also in terms of the range of work, that we have voices at the centre of that who are directly on the front line. For example, we have mentioned issues around workload and administration, and there is important input in terms of the interaction between education agencies such as the EA, the Department and some of the sectoral bodies.

That is all fine, but if you are looking, for example, on the administration side, I would like people sitting round the table who are directly involved day in, day out, such as school principals and teachers. Some of this will be strategic, and some of it will be the nitty-gritty, so, for instance, if you are talking about administration, "Form X is being looked for. We are already supplying that information via form Y. That is not really needed. That can be cut out". It is about that level of knowledge of the impact

that it has daily, and that applies across all those aspects. It will be critical that there is, at least, thinking and voices around the table from those who are directly on the front line.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sure that the Committee would be glad to feed in proposals for your consideration on the composition of those reviews as well, Minister.

Mr Weir: I would be happy to receive any such proposals.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister and the permanent secretary for their early attendance and their openness. I will try to truncate my two questions. I wish you well, Minister. It is not a groundbreaking statement to say that Education is, perhaps, the most important Ministry, along with Health. I thank the permanent secretary for the work that he has done over the last few years and for his accessibility while he held the fort in our absence. There will be a measurable price to pay for that absence.

Mr Baker: I am glad you are back *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: I thank you for that, and there are great challenges. I am new to the Committee, and, when I look through my packs and see the complexity of our education system, I shudder. It concerns me and worries me that to fix this involves the multiple layers, the different groups and things that have been added to the Education portfolio over the years that make it so cumbersome. When you look at the proportion of the Budget that it takes, it is easy to see how we could lose money and, maybe, not best spend it. However, I wish you well, and I believe that the Committee has certainly set out on the right foot. I know that the Chair will do a good job. Minister, I commend you for your comments about mental health. It is well reported that our young people suffer poor mental health, more so than ever. However, we have a duty to look after our teachers too. You picked up on that in your statement, and I really welcome that. I commend that piece of work, which should be taken seriously. If we want to affect our kids, our teachers need to be reinforced in their duty.

I have two questions. The first is an easy one, I think, that will probably have a straightforward answer. Will the recently announced extra post-primary places in the greater Belfast area be in place for September 2020?

Mr Weir: I want to see uncontroversial things fast-tracked. I will add a slight caveat to that. That was announced as proposals from the Education Authority and will require development proposals. Development proposals cover a multitude of sins.

It has maybe been remiss of me not to have said this so far, but I thank the departmental officials, and Derek in particular, for the immense amount of hard work that they have done in the interim period. While there have been restrictions on what they can do, things have not stood still for three years. We have not been in a form of stasis.

There is an opportunity with development proposals to effectively get a two-tier-type system. Specifically, where there are issues with the number of places, and sometimes that is also an issue of rightsizing, and things can be grouped together as proposals, they can be moved forward fairly quickly. To some extent, if you are making adjustments to some of the numbers, it should be fairly uncontroversial. Clearly, if there is a proposal to close school X or to merge schools Y and Z, those things take a bit more time due to the sensitivities around them, even if we are trying to ensure that things move forward as quickly as possible.

There is a fallback situation. The development proposal is to permanently vary the numbers. However, for example, if a particular proposal cannot be brought through on time, there is a power, which has been used in the last year or two, of temporary variations. If it is the case that the change is not ready to be there as a permanent position for September, there is the opportunity to effectively do the same thing by temporary variation.

In Belfast, in particular, there is a demographic pressure on school places that will require a development proposal. There is no point saying, "We will get 50 extra places for this school, and we will do it by getting 10 each year for the next five years"; if that is clearly a long-term issue, it requires a development proposal.

We can progress a lot of those things on a two-speed basis. Particularly as regards uplifts in school place numbers, a route can be progressed, even if it has slowness on one side.

Mr Butler: Just to finish this: there is a need to manage the expectations of parents and pupils who will be seeking a place in schools where a variation has been alluded to, as this is only a proposal. I accept that it can be done through a substantive change or the temporary variation policy. Will it be possible for you to work with the EA on this and make it a priority?

Mr Weir: We can move fairly quickly on that. I am slightly restricted. Even though there will be a range of things that will be uncontroversial, on a development proposal, the Department is the legal authority doing that. There is a limited amount I can say.

Work has already gone on, particularly, on rightsizing. There will be schools that, sometimes, for historical reasons, have an enrolment figure that does not match the reality. It may be as a result of a decision taken in the 1980s because of a particular set of circumstances. Those can be grouped together and, effectively, have one decision taken across a range of schools. There are ways to make this move quickly.

Mr Baker: The proposals that you are talking about, as the Minister said, are for a permanent fix. Two years ago, hands up, we were caught out by some pressures in transfer to post-primary schools. We did not have enough places in certain locations; in Bangor, in particular. We had to scramble, using a very clunky mechanism called temporary variations, and it was not great. Last year, we planned for it, and we did a lot better, because we put additional places in schools in advance. We are planning for transfer 2020 this September. Again, detailed plans are in place. We hope we are doing it even better so that individual schools and parents will know what the admissions numbers are well in advance of when they apply, and I think that is your point. That work is well under way, and I am sure that we could brief the Committee on it.

Mr Weir: There is also this small but important point for parents. Sometimes, there is a misconception, when they are making a choice in the transfer situation, that, if they put down a range of schools, somehow putting school X down at number 5 will prejudice their chances of getting their first choice. That is not the case.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Not for all schools.

Mr Weir: Sorry?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Not for all schools. There are some schools that require a particular approach to ordering.

Mr Weir: I am not saying that. What I am saying is that, if you have your particular school and you want to put that down as number 1, the fact that you are putting something further down the list should not make a particular impact.

Every year, there is a certain number of unplaced children. Sometimes, that has been because there is a disconnect between the number of applications across an area and the number of available places. That is where we have to step in. Some of that is driven, at times, by parents making simply a one-school choice or a two-school choice. I would encourage parents to make at least a range of choices. Obviously, they will want to get into particular schools, but it is important to be able to give the certainty to children that there is that level of choice. I cannot interfere in parents' choices, but I would encourage them to do that.

Mr Butler: Thank you very much. I appreciate that answer. That is for the here and now; this is more of a strategic question, which is probably more in keeping with the conversation today.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Try to keep it brief, Robbie.

Mr Butler: OK, here we go. This is to do with transfer testing. On Saturday, I found myself writing a letter to my 10-year-old self, because of the pressures that our young people find themselves under with transfer testing. I know that, previously, you made a commitment to look at how we do that. I am hoping that you do. Will it be a priority for you to address the transfer testing and streaming? Perhaps you would even consider a further look at the Dickson plan and how we address kids. The reason for my asking about this is that, if I wanted to do a GCSE today, I could not do it; if I wanted to do an A level today, I could not do it. You get one shot at that test. It seems grossly unfair that we are burdening our young people and streaming them at 10 years of age.

Mr Weir: I will make two points. If there is, within the current system, anything that can be done that will ease the pressures on children, from a process point of view, I would like to see it done. Ideally, I would like to see a situation, for instance, in which the two organisations reach a common position. There has been sporadic work between them at times. That would at least be helpful. Most children who do the transfer test will do either AQE or GL, but there is an overlap. I think that there are at least 1,000 in the overlap; perhaps, we can reduce that. Anything I can do to ease the situation, I will try and do, although some of that is outside my gift. I can act as a persuader, facilitator, etc.

I am conscious that, across the board, there is strong support for Dickson. I want to ensure that Dickson is, therefore, protected, where it happens. If we talk about whether there should be academic selection or non-academic selection, I will take a particular view. This argument has been raging for 50-plus years, and I am conscious that there will be a range of things where I do not simply disappear down a rabbit hole. We could sit on this Committee, I suspect, and debate academic selection for many, many years; I do not think that we are going to reach a consensus on it. It is a case of doing what can be done. If there is any action that I can take that will ease that situation, I will try and take it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Our predecessor Committee agreed to hold an inquiry into educational attainment and post-primary transfer, and that is available to us to reinstate. We will be giving that consideration in due course.

Mr Weir: That is no problem to me. The reality is that it is difficult to see, at a political or even a societal level, where there is consensus on that. They are *[Inaudible.]* A concern of mine, which I have raised with you, when we have been on programmes, is that, every time there is a debate on underachievement, the easy thing for some to do, particularly in broadcast media, is to bring on two people who have a different view on selection and spend the hour discussing that, when, actually, the real focus needs to be on the quality interventions you can make for children at an early age.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you both for coming this morning and speaking with us. When you talk about underachievement and early intervention, a childcare strategy needs to be published sooner rather than later. When will it be published? The Sure Start budget for the past two years has remained the same. We would probably all be in agreement that we need to see further investment in Sure Start. Is the Department working on a development plan to increase the resource?

Mr Weir: We work to put as much money as we can into Sure Start. However, it is difficult to make particular budgetary commitments on things — I appreciate the thing — until we see what the global bit is. If you take the worst-case scenario and we got a standstill budget and, for the sake of argument, I am left with a £400 million gap, it is then very difficult to increase facilities in certain areas.

It is undoubtedly the case that early intervention is critical, and we need to ensure that. That is why the permanent secretary spoke about taking a step back to make sure that we are allocating resources as well as we possibly can. There are inventive ways in which we can, for instance, encourage reading. There are imaginative solutions around that.

I am aware of Sure Start and some of the Pathways to Work funding that is there, and when you get into school the nurture side of it, so there are good interventions that we want to ensure get support. I am also keen, at the very least, to try to protect that funding if there is a tighter financial position, so with issues around Sure Start or Pathways, I will not be looking to make cutbacks there if I am forced into a financial situation.

That, to be fair, is the approach that has been taken by the Department in the past few years. When there have been gaps and we have not been able to do as much as we wanted or even had to seek cuts, the one thing that we effectively ring-fenced were early interventions, and that is absolutely critical.

Mr Baker: When money has been tight, and I have ended up, as an accounting officer, in an overspend position, which is a really uncomfortable and wrong place to be, we have protected all those programmes — nurture, Sure Start, Pathways — even though they are non-statutory. Youth is statutory and schools are statutory. Those three are not, but we recognise their longer-term benefits. *[Inaudible.]*

Ms C Kelly: Minister, is there a timescale on the childcare strategy?

Mr Weir: We are hoping fairly soon to put a paper to the Executive. As I said, I think the problem, even if we get a green light on a proposal, will be that it will take a reasonable length of time to shift up from where we are to where we need to be. A lot of that is around capacity.

For example, we have what can be counted as full-time nursery provision, which does not cover the full 30 hours anyway, for three in eight children. The remainder — the majority — will be on the part-time bit. If one solution was to move towards everybody getting the higher level of provision, you are talking about millions of additional hours, which physically in terms of premises and workforce would require a certain level of up-skilling and expansion. There is in that an issue around expectation.

It is undoubtedly the case that it would benefit the educational development of young children if we can provide that childcare expansion. There would also be a massive spin-off for the economy by reducing the pressure on families through a greater level of provision. In that sense, it is a no-brainer. The only issue would be getting the finance to do it, and do it as quickly as we can.

Mr M Bradley: Congratulations on your appointment, Minister, and thank you very much for coming here today. Thanks, too, to the permanent secretary. I know that in our absence he has been a very busy boy, so it might take a bit of pressure off now that we are back here.

Minister, you have alluded a lot to your budget pressures. Roughly how much money will be needed to meet this New Decade, New Approach undertaking to ensure that every school has a sustainable budget?

Mr Weir: Specifically, on that, it is a bit of a moveable feast, but we estimate that perhaps about £60 million would be required to be mainstreamed. That does not bring us back up to the position that we were in a few years ago, and it is a question of how fast we could move to start closing that gap. That is a recurring figure. There are references in the new deal to a range of things, and there is a bit of a moveable feast as to whether you put that as, effectively, an inevitable pressure that will be there next year or as part of the new deal bit. You can look at school budgets, but there is also, I think, in the new deal reference to childcare, among other areas. The big-ticket items, such as ensuring that there is a SEN side of things and a resolution to industrial action, have also moved with the new deal.

We can put different things in different columns. Some of the smaller, specific items have been mentioned, such as the commissions and greater work with schools and Ulster Scots. A lot of those things, while they are very important, are not big financial asks and can be accommodated. As I said, we have estimated that we will need £60 million next year. That will not bring schools back up to a comfortable position, but it will, hopefully, mean that they will be in a position in which their expenditure can at least meet the resources, but it will not enable them, for want of a better word, to do anything particularly new or additional on that basis.

The other issue that is part of the work streams is that, while the big problem is the lack of finance, we want to make sure through, for instance, looking at the common funding formula, that we are spending the money as well as we can. That is always difficult because it will ultimately mean some money coming away from schools and some money going, and we will also look at whether we are using earmarked funding properly. The big item is clearly the big gap between what is needed to essentially pay that bit there. I am praising the permanent secretary. He did not do what I suggested — close various schools in east Londonderry — just before I came into office so that he would take the blame rather than me, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: I will leave that there. I have another quick question about New Decade, New Approach. Does it mean that, in future, to save money, we will have fewer, but larger, schools?

Mr Weir: For a number of years, the logic of area planning has been that there will ultimately be some reduction in the number of schools. There is no doubt that, from an efficiency and economy point of view, there are implications to that. The bigger issue, from my perspective, is the educational impact at times. Some really good work has gone on in lots of very small schools, and we are also keen, from the point of view of parents' choice and from the point of view of communities, that we do not leave children entirely isolated or a long, long distance away from a school.

Again, if you started with a blank page, you would not have the distribution of schools that we have. However, we realise that there are a lot of sensitivities around where schools are. It will have some

economic impact, but I would not overestimate its impact on pure savings. It is probably more about sensible arrangements for sustainable provision.

Part of the problem is that schools might have been put in that place by the Education Authority or, previously, by the education boards. One of the reasons why I want things to move more quickly is that, once a school is put under that question mark, there is a shadow hanging over it that creates problems for the school and for the parents. Therefore, while it is important that things are done thoroughly and correctly, they should not be prolonged for the sake of being prolonged.

Mr McNulty: Thank you very much, Minister. Congratulations on your reappointment. It is already apparent that you are thoroughly over your brief. I also thank the permanent secretary, Derek Baker, who has been very helpful and very responsible over the last number of years in our absence.

Mr Weir: I assume that he has not bribed all of you to say this type of thing. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNulty: No, not at all; not that we would be bribable anyway. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: No, no. For the benefit of Standards and Privileges.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister confirm that there is £68 million from the Finance Minister to resolve the ongoing dispute with the teachers' trade unions? Are you in a position to confirm that that money is forthcoming?

Mr Weir: It will depend, Justin. The money is not there at present. I think that it will be an issue for next year's Budget. To be fair, I suspect that there is a strong desire from the Finance Minister and others to see that being resolved. He is in the slightly invidious position of the pressures from all Departments being much greater than what is available, so there will have to be discussions. That is a key priority. It has an impact on our children, obviously, as well as on staff. There has not been a sign-off on it because the money is not there, but there is an opportunity for it to be brought into play in the Budget, which will be announced in, roughly, a month's time.

Mr McNulty: Should the Department of Finance make the £68 million available, will you confirm that the money will be used to finance the deal as agreed by your Department and the employing authority with the trades unions in May 2019?

Mr Weir: Yes.

Mr McNulty: Thank you. How long do you anticipate it will take for action and outcomes on the measures to be progressed urgently and reviewed in the nine key areas?

Mr Weir: Are you talking about the transformation stream or the work groups?

Mr Baker: I think that it is work streams associated with a potential pay award.

Mr Weir: A certain amount of preparatory work has been done. Some are things that simply can be done on an administrative level and can be produced. Let me just read into the record in terms of that; it may be useful enough. The work streams are:

"Review of the employment model for teachers; review of the use of temporary and substitute teachers; review of workloads agreement; review of workload impact on school leavers; review of workload associated with special educational needs; review of accountability framework"—

which, obviously, takes in inspection —

"review of consultation arrangements"—

and that is between management and teachers' unions —

"review of statutory assessments at Key Stage 1, 2, and 3; review of initiatives to promote and support teacher health and well-being."

I also want to see that there is no delay in those and that we get as many of them over the line as possible. There are many different aspects to them, so some will come more quickly than others. If we get agreement, it will not be, "Here are nine work streams. We've got to wait for all nine work streams." We cannot wait for the slowest boat, to be perfectly honest on it. If we get, for instance, agreement, or even hear some interim improvements that we can make, on one, I will be keen to get those announced, over the line and implemented as soon as possible in that regard. Even if you take something on workload, if there are certain things that can be agreed early — "Well, here's A, B and C that can be done, but there's further discussion to be had on that" — let us at least get those banked and moved on.

Mr Baker: Just to add, there is a capacity issue on the teacher union side as well that we have to acknowledge. We have made some limited provision for some of those work streams in our transformation programme, and we are ready to put resource in to that immediately. We have to help the teaching unions, too, because there is a big burden on them. All of those work streams will be done in conjunction and partnership with the teacher unions; it will not be unilateral.

Mr McNulty: Thank you. Does the Minister expect that any of the schools with a very big — let us say £1 million-plus — deficit to have to close in the short to medium term because of their financial position?

Mr Weir: Financial sustainability is one aspect of things, but sustainability is a wider side of things. Given that, across the board, a range of development proposals will be put forward on which I will have to take a final legal decision, it is probably inappropriate to comment on that wider bit without, potentially, risking there being implications. However, there is an important bit as to how financially sustainable schools are. There are issues around what the sustainability of school numbers is in relation to that. Moreover, we have had, for a number of years, a sustainable schools policy. I think that people broadly think that that may well be the general direction of travel. We are taking a look at that internally to see whether the sustainable schools policy is sustainable, if you know what I mean; we need to see whether there are any tweaks that we need to make to that to make sure that what is there is still absolutely fit for purpose.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Minister. Last question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The very last.

Mr McNulty: Further to what William and Robbie discussed earlier, is there the potential to introduce a resilience element to the education curriculum, and in relation to teachers, to address the epidemic that is devastating so many families?

Mr Weir: That is one of the areas, along with what provision we make, that we want to look at with Health. As I said, there are the two sides. The main focus, understandably and rightly, is on the impact on pupils. There is also the resilience of staff. Sometimes, there can be a range of useful interventions, one of which is looking at where we can build resilience into the curriculum. There are also ideas; there are things out there. For instance, I was at a meeting, a while ago, with a constituent who, at that stage, was at school — I know Robbie will have met the individual concerned as well. She made suggestions. Her school has peer support, which is not something that requires financing but is a good idea and is working. We will look at ideas like that as well. There is no silver bullet that solves everything of that nature. It will be a cocktail a bit; it will be about looking at resilience that we can build in.

Mr McNulty: It is something that all of us as legislators must agree to tackle. It is cross-departmental and, because of the epidemic, we need to take responsibility.

Mr Weir: It is. Even leaving aside the particular circumstances of schools and young people, the Executive as a whole agree that this is critical issue. It was one of the key topics discussed on the away day.

Mr Baker: Even before the Executive came back and committed to mental health issues and resilience, work was well advanced in the Department, with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, on looking at a health and well-being framework for young people. It is looking at working together, should resource become available, or even if it should not, what we can do and what

we can do better. We would be happy to brief the Committee at some stage on that work with our colleagues in Health.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We have a briefing scheduled on that.

Mr Baker: You are ahead of me.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, thank you. Just to close: for the avoidance of doubt, further to our meeting with the teaching unions, and given that the 'New Decade, New Approach' document is so clear that the commitment from the Executive is to urgently resolve the teachers' industrial dispute, what is your assessment of any consequence of not urgently resolving the teacher dispute, given that we are talking about next budgets as the stage when it will be resolved?

Mr Weir: Yes, but do not forget: when we are talking about "next budgets", we are talking about something that will be announced probably within the next month.

There is always the danger that any Minister can highlight the money as opposed to the policy issues. The reason I highlighted the money is the big-ticket items, some of which need solved, such as industrial action and school finances —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): They require finance; there is no way round that.

Mr Weir: Yes. It is undoubtedly the case that if the money is made available, there is resolution that it can happen; if it is not, we are, collectively, in very difficult situations. I am not minimising that risk.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We agree: decisive investment and decisive action are needed. We will work with you and hold you to account on those issues. We are extremely grateful for the time that you have given us today.

Mr Weir: If any of you have any influence on the Finance Minister, it would be greatly appreciated.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sincere thanks. I echo what other members have said about the work conducted by the Department, particularly the permanent secretary. We are extremely grateful for that. Thank you.