



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Coronavirus Response: Minister of Education

18 March 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 Robbie Butler
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Weir	Minister of Education
Mr Derek Baker	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, and the permanent secretary, Mr Derek Baker. By way of welcome, I should say that when we originally invited you to the Committee today, it was in response to the very serious issue of the Education Authority (EA) audit of the special educational needs (SEN) statementing process. However, matters have progressed since then, and we are in the midst of the extremely serious public health challenge of COVID-19.

I propose, therefore, that we start with the Department of Education's response to coronavirus — COVID-19 — with a presentation from you and questions from the Committee. If time permits, we will consider the high-level issues relating to the EA audit of the SEN statementing process, perhaps with an intention to return to that matter in a bit more detail, if you are content with that approach.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Chair, I am content with any way that the Committee wishes to proceed. In normal times, the SEN issue would be a critical one. However, we are living in unprecedented times, so I am happy to deal with the issues in the time available to us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Your schedule permits you to be here until 11:30 am. Is that right?

Mr Weir: Yes. I am in the Committee's hands.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister and permanent secretary, thank you very much indeed for coming to the Committee today. You do not need me to tell you that there is a degree of confusion and concern amongst schools and parents across Northern Ireland in relation to the coronavirus and COVID-19 response. I hope that our Committee can approach the matter with leadership in mind and provide as much clarity as we can to the situation. I am grateful for your attendance here today, Minister. I invite you to make a presentation to the Committee.

Mr Weir: Thank you. We are meeting in unprecedented times and at a critical time, not just in Northern Ireland but around the world. All of us have a level of concern and worry about how this will affect the entire community. We are all looking to friends and family. There is a fear that before we emerge from it, all of us, in some shape or form, will be touched by this terrible virus.

One of the obstacles to the approach that we have taken is the continuing fluidity of the situation. Even where we can pass on advice, instructions or information to schools and other youth settings, the Department is acting almost in a silo because we are dependent on very detailed specialist advice from medical experts, particularly the Public Health Agency (PHA). There is obviously a desire on its part to ensure that anything that is sent on is absolutely 100% accurate. The required level of detail means that, sometimes, we are not in a position to get it to schools as quickly as we would like.

The buck stops with me. As I have said before, the approach that we have taken is to ensure that any action that is taken or any advice that is given is entirely compatible with the expert medical and scientific advice. We will come on to some of those issues. My goal throughout this is to ensure that the education of our young people continues to be looked after. I think that a range of those practical measures will create very big problems at times for the Department, but they can all probably be overcome, particularly as we move ahead from where we are. The biggest single challenge is, obviously, the protection of public health and public life; consequently, we are trying to take all steps that are compatible with the scientific advice. Again, I think that it would be irresponsible to move outside that sphere.

Having said that, we are in a fluid situation. Even as we speak, work is ongoing by some of the scientific advisory people to reassess and to make sure that what we have is fit for purpose. It is, therefore, likely to be a moving situation, and that may limit what I can say directly. From that point of view, I have always indicated that I do not have a particularly doctrinaire position that says, "This is the right answer; this is the wrong answer". What I have said is that I want to be guided entirely by the scientific and medical evidence. I will not take us in a direction that is contrary to that, but, as I said, we are in a fluid situation. We have seen that this week, as some of the announcements that were made on Monday will have implications. Given that fluid situation, it may well be that, in looking for further announcements, we can try to wrap up as much as possible together rather than doing it piecemeal.

I can update the Committee on one particular aspect simply because it arose this morning. I welcome the fact that, this morning, the chief inspector has written to all schools, confirming that, for the rest of this school term, there will be no further inspection visits by the Education and Training Inspectorate. That is a very sensible move, and I suspect that many education settings will welcome it.

As we move forward, a number of contingency issues need to be looked at. It is clear that we will reach a point at which schools will be closed, and that will have implications. We have to be careful that a narrative is not developed or that there is a misunderstanding that simply saying that schools ceasing to operate on site means that education stops. That is not the case. I know that schools have already done quite a lot of work. We sent out the message to them, no later than Monday of this week, that they need to prepare materials so that, when we reach the point at which school closures happen, they are in a position to carry on with online teaching and packs for pupils. It is important that, in this horrific crisis, people do not miss out on their education and, therefore, that that preparation is done.

Probably the major reason why the broad advice has been to keep schools open at this stage has been the work that is ongoing to make assessments. There are different assessments, if you like, of the particular extent and modelling of the spread of the virus, depending upon where children are and where the schools are going. Probably the single biggest factor has been the parental response that will be needed. There is a concern that, unless something is done that gives cover and support, we will see a denuding of front-line emergency services, particularly on the health side.

Therefore, there will be ongoing work to establish that, even in the event of overall school closures, we can provide some level of cover for that particular set of workers. It will mean that we may be able to provide childcare facilities because the numbers of children of those workers are an awful lot smaller than the number of children in the broader school population. That will ensure that we have all the health and safety requirements to provide the protection of social distancing. That is ongoing and will be ramped up in the days ahead.

There are discussions taking place as we speak at which the Department is represented by senior officials. Across the Executive, there is a civil contingencies group, which involves all the Departments and which is chaired by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and also involves a number of

the key services such as, for example, the Ambulance Service, the PSNI etc. A lot of the work that has to be done cuts across Departments. One area that we are working on with Health and Communities — should there be a complete shutdown — is how we deal with free school meals. Getting a warm meal to those who are vulnerable goes well beyond children; it is also about how we provide support to vulnerable adults. Work has been ongoing between my officials and other Departments on how that can best be managed. People need to realise that about two thirds of the cost of free school meals is for the payment of the workers. I think that it is less than a pound for the actual food, because you have the benefit of volume of scale. Some people have talked about some form of voucher system to pay for that, but that would not be practical because it would not cover the money. However, that will be dealt with on an Executive-wide basis. On the broader area of feeding the vulnerable, the principal direction of travel will probably come from the Department for Communities.

There is a key concern about examinations. Considerable work has been done on that, and Derek will want to give a little bit more detail, whether in response to questions or in a minute or two. There has been a good deal of work with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on the options for examinations. At this stage, the principal concentration will be on public examinations, particularly GCSEs, AS levels, A levels, which will have a direct impact on pupils' future.

If it is simply an internal examination, that is obviously far less pressing and will not be of particular significance. We are in a good position in Northern Ireland internally because we operate CCEA on a linear model, which means that there can be levels of assessment. That gives us a range of options. The preferred option for all of us is that, if schools were operating reasonably normally, exams would be able to be held. Indeed, that is the preferred option across the board. However, there is a realisation that that may not be practical, and so CCEA is developing a range of options.

One of the limitations that we have is that sections of our examinations market lie outside Northern Ireland and things are not as easy in England. Moreover, they feed in particularly to examination results and a competitive process, particularly at A level, for universities throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. Therefore, it is critical that CCEA works with the other examination bodies, the examination regulators and the universities to scope out the options. That can then be applicable across the board, because there is no point in our pupils getting particular grades if nobody else is because no decisions will be able to be made at university level. Derek has some more detail on that. Derek, do you want to say anything else about examinations?

Mr Derek Baker (Department of Education): No, I think that that is enough at this stage. I am happy to pick up questions.

Mr Weir: I am sure that I have forgotten to mention something, but I am sure that it will be picked up in questions. I will simply reiterate that we are in a critical but fluid situation, so we will try to give answers as best we can. As with all these things, there is a strong possibility of our responses or questions being overtaken very quickly by events.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Minister and permanent secretary. I am acutely aware of the need for us, collectively, to demonstrate leadership on these issues. I am aware of my role as Chair of a Statutory Committee. I am going to take a very brief moment to state, separate from my role as Chair, that the Alliance Party position on the issue this week was to propose and support proposals for engagement with stakeholders and the allocation of time to plan for a phased school closure from Friday 20 March. Having said that, I will ensure that my position, as Chair of the Committee, is as Chair of the Committee; I will ask questions and guide questions from members.

Minister, do you know how many schools in Northern Ireland are closed today?

Mr Weir: Again —.

Mr Baker: Sorry, not today, because the picture is changing. We can provide that information: we gather it daily. However, I could give you a figure today, and it could be wrong in 10 minutes' time.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Suffice it to say that we are all aware that it is a significant number, which suggests, objectively speaking, that the attempt to enrol schools in your position with regards to a call to follow expert clinical advice is diminishing. I will give you another opportunity to explain more fully what that expert clinical advice is and why it leads you to call for schools to remain open.

Mr Weir: OK. As I said, we are in a moving situation where further consideration of even the expert medical advice is happening more widely. Different people have different thoughts and views on how best to tackle the virus. The Executive and I have directly sought the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. That is backed up by the Public Health Agency and, UK-wide, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

That advice was delineated initially and then, on Thursday, directly by the Chief Medical Officer, when the Executive met within a few hours of the announcement in the Republic of Ireland. His view was that, in terms of interventions, the beneficial impact of any form of school closures could be relatively minimal and that, therefore, to some extent, was down the pecking order of various things that should be done. Moreover, he thought that this was not the right time to do it. He talked about wanting the right interventions at the right time to make the maximum level of impact.

There are 340,000 schoolchildren, if you include preschool children. The other thing that has to be made clear is that, leaving aside what can specifically be done for emergency workers, when we talk about school closures, that is also code for youth settings and childcare facilities; it has to be entirely across the board. The principal concern is that, if you take that number of parents out quickly, at a critical time where particular responses are needed for the virus, inevitably two things will happen. The vast bulk of pupils require some form of childcare arrangements; those at the upper echelons of school — those in their late teens — will not require anybody in with them, but younger children, in particular, certainly will. That, inevitably, would lead to enormous disruption to the health service and front-line services. It would take quite a large number of health-service workers out of the equation when they are most needed.

The other practical implication that predates the advice that emerged on Monday is that many parents simply cannot afford for one of them to be at home, no matter what provision is made, and a lot of those childcare arrangements will then fall to grandparents. We know, from what has been detected about the virus's mortality rate, that the elderly are the most vulnerable. The concern was that whatever benefits you would have from removing children from other children, at least in the school setting, would be more than offset by the impact at that stage on those two categories. That is not commonly understood, despite the impression given, at least initially, in the Republic of Ireland.

The medical advice is that if you are looking at school closures to isolate children and take them out of the equation, it is not simply a case of withdrawing things. As the Taoiseach said last night, this will be a sustained and long-term situation. If you withdraw children from school, it will not be for a two-week period and then everything can go back to normal. Realistically, when school closures happen and children are removed, we are talking about the rest of this academic year. It will run into the summer holidays, so it is actually until the end of August, and that is a very long time. All those factors have led the Chief Medical Officer to a clear-cut assessment that now is not the right time to close schools. That is the background to the broad scientific reasoning for that decision.

Obviously, I am very concerned about the education of our young people, but my principal concern is the assessment of the impact on public health. It is likely that there will be a horrendous number of deaths arising out of this. We do not know how many, and it is wrong to speculate, but there will be large numbers of deaths. We want to try to keep those to a minimum, because every individual death is not simply a statistic; it will have an impact on a family. Therefore, my overriding duty, having been assured that what is there is compatible with what I am told, is to try to preserve life. Frankly, there are no easy choices in relation to this, and we are moving in a fluid environment.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. There are a couple of things that I want to follow up on, Minister. First, can I seek clarity about why the closure period will need to be for 14 to 16 weeks?

Mr Weir: That is the clinical advice. This virus will not be eradicated quickly, and 14 to 16 weeks is the clinical advice. I know that a two-week period was announced in the Republic of Ireland, but I suspect that that will simply have to be extended. I am dwelling on areas where I do not have expertise, but unless you are at a very early stage of a virus where you had one or two cases and you felt that a particular action could eradicate it or hermetically seal it for the future, the clinical advice is that a two-week break is not really going to do a great deal of good. If you are trying to genuinely suppress the numbers, a much longer period will be necessary. I have heard talk of three or four months, although it may be even longer. The feeling is that two weeks would simply be a token gesture.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. You do, however, say that there will be school closure and that it will be for a considerable time. You have said that the clinical advice is about deciding on school closure at the right time. Have you any clear indication as to when that right time will be?

Mr Weir: I will have to rely directly on the scientific advice. The modelling of the spread suggests that things are moving more quickly than anybody had anticipated, which will influence timing. It is important that we make the right interventions at the right time. That is, in part, to ensure that we have the maximum impact. Some of that will relate to the modelling of when we can suppress the spike. If we are to face large numbers of cases, we want, as much as possible, to try to massage the situation so that they happen at a time when there is least pressure on the health service. If we were to face a situation in which, for example, the peak point of a virus outbreak was during the winter, the health service would, effectively, fall over. That is not impossible; it could happen, and we need to guard against that.

The potential mortality rate is not simply about those who die from the virus. If the hospitals were to become overwhelmed by the virus, that would, inevitably, have a pretty large knock-on effect on other mortality. It would mean that patients could not be treated quickly. Patients with serious conditions would not be able to get a bed. That is a danger at whatever stage the peak comes. However, it is a particular danger if the peak is reached during the wrong period. That would mean quite a large number of secondary deaths from conditions that, under normal circumstances, could be treated and cured. The medical profession often talks about the golden hour, particularly for heart attacks. People not getting that initial intervention very quickly leads to deaths. Inevitably, that will happen to some extent, no matter when things happen, but we want to keep that to a minimum as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. At this stage, the UK advice relating to flattening the curve has escalated. The general population should work from home and practise social distancing, where possible. For at-risk groups, the advice to socially isolate is even clearer. Can you understand why teachers and parents expect that it ought to be possible to give a clearer answer on when the time for closure will be?

Mr Weir: Discussions are ongoing with the Chief Medical Officers and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and those feed directly into the Government. I understand the frustration. The problem is that, whatever we do, it is entirely condition-led. Therefore, the more precision that can be given, the better. Further movement must be on the basis of giving that very clear understanding to people and trying, as much as possible, to have an overall package of information. Sometimes, trying to align everything so as to be able to give that information is difficult. Certainly, as we move ahead, and the situation is fluid, I hope to see something that can give greater certainty. I entirely understand the obvious frustration out there. We all face that frustration, which is allied very much with concern, because this is not just some sort of flu epidemic, with people facing being a bit sick. We are talking about a very deadly virus for which there is no cure. Fortunately, for the vast bulk of people who will suffer from this, the condition will be relatively mild. For some, however — estimates vary — it will be a fatal condition. That is very scary for everybody. To be honest, it is scary for me as I look at society. The concerns out there are absolutely understandable, and I completely appreciate that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Let us, then, focus on responding to those concerns, as well as the escalation of the UK advice affecting concerns about timing. As I said, the advice is for the general population to work from home and to socially distance, where possible, and for at-risk groups to socially isolate. You will appreciate that many in the school population, across the system, are in at-risk categories, particularly those in special school provision. What has been, and what is, your guidance for people in schools who are in the at-risk category? The Government have directed them to socially isolate, but they are being required to attend our schools today.

Mr Weir: Nothing that we would say would be incompatible with that, and I bear that in mind. We have been working with the Public Health Agency on specific advice. We are in a fluid situation. I hope to see a situation in which there could be wider agreement and wider announcements on the way forward. It is important that everything is then brought together within that position.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Members will want to press you on some of those issues. You mentioned the significance of having childcare arrangements in place, particularly for key health staff. What engagement have you had with the childcare sector? What plans are being put in place to provide that care?

Mr Weir: The principal focus will, of course, be on healthcare, but other sectors will also require a level of protection. One area that will need to be scoped — it may well be being scoped — is, if we move to a situation of that nature, which other key workers this will cover. That will be raised at the civil contingencies group in order to get an assessment from Departments. We need to assess the numbers. We also need to assess the willingness of parents. Some parents with an eligibility requirement will say, "Well, to help to facilitate me remaining at work as a nurse, doctor or ambulance driver, this is a key thing that I want to take advantage of". Others may say, "Actually, I have my own arrangements, so I don't need to do that" or "I still would prefer something at home".

When talking about childcare, I am not talking simply about what can be provided for the preschool cohort. We will examine the extent to which it can be extended. When talking about childcare, I am also talking about particular teaching arrangements for some children. It is about a mix. There are enormous logistical difficulties. It is difficult until we get a handle on the numbers. We can then start modelling how we make that provision. That will not happen overnight.

Mr Baker: Would the Committee find it helpful if I gave a brief overview of what is going on in the Department? The Minister has dealt with a number of high-level policy issues, but I can update the Committee, and maybe that will prompt questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, go ahead.

Mr Baker: From a departmental perspective, as with all Departments, this is now the single issue. We have invoked our emergency response arrangements. The way in which that will probably manifest itself to the Committee and other stakeholders is that the day job will cease, and a lot of routine, though important, business will stop. Maybe the Committee will feel the cold wind of that, but we will stop lots of work simply to create capacity and resource to deal with some of the issues that the Committee is concerned about.

The Committee has been briefed on transformation projects, for example. We will suspend those and use the teams to do other work. We have good people working on bringing forward important, high-profile development proposals. They need to be helping us. The Committee is well aware of the big-ticket issues, and the Minister mentioned them. From an education perspective, as opposed to a wider public health perspective, five big-ticket issues concern us, and we have been working on those.

Examinations were mentioned, particularly the GCSE and A-level public examinations. CCEA has been working in detail on how its contingency plans measure against different scenarios across the spectrum. Robust contingency plans are in place to deal with disruption, even major disruption, to examinations, but we could be moving to something way beyond that. As the Minister said, CCEA will need to work with the three other UK bodies and its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. We have an advantage in that most of the examinations — 97% at GCSE level — are CCEA examinations and within our control. About 15% at A level are run by awarding bodies in Great Britain. We are looking at all contingencies. At this point, I declare an interest. The message is that pupils need to prepare as normal. I do not want my 16-year-old to put the books down just yet. Pupils need to keep working. However, you could look at a scenario, ultimately, in which the whole timetable moves to the right — we could accommodate that — meaning that you would have to engage with the university and further education sectors to change the whole admissions arrangement. That is all doable, but it is uncomfortable.

The second big-ticket issue that the Minister mentioned is the welfare of children, including school meals. That, however, becomes a wider societal issue. The Minister, later today, will get proposals on options for dealing with that. As we speak, the Department is engaging with the Department for Communities and the Department of Health, and there are options to mobilise the voluntary and community sector, which is well organised, to help with the logistical arrangements for getting meals to children, bearing in mind that we will not be able to bring lots of children into school settings where school meals are normally delivered, but there are other ways of doing it. You could look at distributing funding or vouchers so that people can buy meals, or at various combinations of that, but it is a huge logistical problem.

The third issue is the welfare of children generally. Bear in mind that we have in the school system many vulnerable children and at-risk children. For many, their main touchpoint with the system is going to school. We need to make sure that, if schools are closed and those children are not going to school, they do not fall through the net. We are talking to the Department of Health — this is mainly on the social care side — to ensure that those arrangements will be in place. A specific example raised with

us by a school leader on Friday, "What if a post-primary pupil is part way through a process of school counselling. We do not want that to be lost".

The fourth issue is distance learning and keeping learning going as well as possible. Schools are doing a super job — I have seen some of the guidance that is going out — and are preparing to support distance learning. That could be online. Packages are available, and the EA is trying to ensure that there is capacity in the system. C2k was not built for this, but there are other packages such as Google Classroom. Indeed, hard packs are also going out to pupils. All of that will be ongoing.

The final issue is childcare, which is difficult. We are talking to colleagues in the third sector and the Department of Health to see how we might be able to provide support to critical workers for the wider economy, particularly the health and social care sector. Teams are working really hard on all of those issues as we speak. They have been working night and day and at weekends. They worked all day yesterday and are tired, but they are bringing forward potential solutions to Ministers.

The point that I make in all of this is that there is no good, elegant or positive outcome here. We are in the business of mitigations and least worst outcomes, and everybody needs to realise that. Closing schools does not produce a good outcome for teaching and learning, but we are talking about making mitigations as best we can, and we will welcome any ideas and potential solutions that the Committee can bring to those issues. We are in unprecedented times and are developing potential solutions that have never been applied before, so we are in new territory. That was a bit of context from the Department's perspective.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that update and the extent of work initiated, and I acknowledge the modelling that has been considered for the timing of school closures. However, as I said in my initial remarks, schools are closed and childcare is needed. The modelling to avoid contact with grandparents and sustain access to work for critical workers is now needed, so there is extreme urgency for full clarity on all of these matters.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you for being here today. Minister, I believe that you contradicted yourself earlier. You mentioned that there may be a large number of deaths as a result of this virus. Yet, today, children are told to go to school. The safety of our children is paramount at this time. It is health before education. You talk about classrooms. Most classes across the North have at least 35 children and two staff in a small classroom. How can social distancing be accomplished or practised in an environment such as that? I have a few other questions, if you want to answer those afterwards.

Mr Weir: I will take each of them as they come. A high level of confusion about social distancing will have arisen from what was raised centrally on Monday. I completely agree with you, which is why the decisions that have been taken were taken. All of us accept that education is important, but health is the absolute number one priority. The indications given to the Chief Medical Officer, and indeed the wider advice, are that this is the route that preserves the most lives. The best model is that, if you are to reach a point at which schools are closed, they are closed at the right time. I can take that professional advice and the Executive can take that professional advice — that is the position that the Executive as a whole have taken — or we can ignore it. That advice will move on over time because of changing circumstances. I do not have a doctrinaire position of wanting to keep schools open full stop. It is about following that advice. If the advice changes, I will be more than happy to alter that. You are right: I am doing this on the basis of the professional advice on what is best for the overall health of everybody. It is taken very seriously, Catherine.

Ms C Kelly: What risk assessments, if any, have been carried out in schools to ensure health and safety at this time?

Mr Weir: A number of schools have done risk assessments. This is part of the overall position, though, in respect of the available health advice. The permanent secretary put it very well: there is no perfect, ideal or, indeed, good solution; this is about mitigation. It is about trying to ensure that the overall picture results in the best possible consequences for public health — or perhaps, in the current circumstances, I should say the least worst consequences. That is where we have been coming from.

Ms C Kelly: Does the Department hold a list of staff who have underlying health issues? How have they been communicated with?

Mr Weir: The Department is not their employer. I am not sure whether the employers hold such a list. If you are talking about underlying health conditions, the direction of travel will be made clear. Different

people will have different health problems. It is whether they fit into the particular categories and reach a particular level. However, the Department is not the employer, so it does not have a full list of staff. That is outside the Department's remit.

Ms C Kelly: I have another issue. There are at least 200 Education Authority bus drivers in Fermanagh and Omagh, where I live. Half of them are over the age of 65, so they are in the high-risk category. They drive as many as 55 children across Fermanagh and Omagh for three or four hours a day. Will there be any advice from the Department?

Mr Weir: There will be. Part of the aim of this, working with the PHA and more widely, is to try to have something very soon that gives a clearer picture across all the issues. Clearly, that is one of the key concerns. However, rather than doing something piecemeal, I want to try to bring it together across the board very quickly.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Catherine. Minister, I asked this earlier. There are people in the school system who are in an at-risk group that has been directed to socially isolate. Do you echo that guidance for them to socially isolate? Do you have any assessment of the impact of that social isolation on our schools? We are receiving communication that multiple teaching and non-teaching staff in certain schools have been directed to socially isolate. Do you have any assessment of what impact that has had on the schools?

Mr Weir: Obviously, there is a fairly significant impact. In answer to your first question, I support the advice that has been given. Consistently, throughout this, I have said that we need to be guided by the direct medical advice. Therefore, I will not pick and choose which bits I accept. That, in itself, will have a major impact on the ability to deliver education and will factor in to the wider position, which, hopefully, will become clearer soon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Permanent secretary, do you want to come in on that?

Mr Baker: No.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, and permanent secretary for coming in today in what are very challenging times. I know the work that you have been putting in, and the Department is working very hard. Thank you for the update. We are all here to work together on this. It is our responsibility to do what is best. We are short on time, so I will not go over what I went over on Monday. Peter, I have reached out to you, and you know our position. I have also submitted a list of questions and will add to those as we go along.

There are a few things that I want to pick up on. I have listened to you over the last number of days and here this morning. Is the Executive approach a workforce issue and not a health issue? We seem to be talking about keeping children in school to allow front-line staff to go to work. Catherine said that it was a contradiction. We must be putting our front-line staff in danger when all those children are going to school and then coming home to their parents and other family members. Health is a priority, but we keep coming back to the workforce issue. That goes back to some of the questions that have already been raised. What is the Department's directive to school staff and children with a medical condition, those who are pregnant and those who fall into the category that should be socially isolating? Boris Johnson has been clear about that over the last two days.

Mr Weir: The answer to those two, arguably, interrelated questions, is that there are differences of opinion, particularly on school closures. Within the Executive, different opinions are genuinely held. However, there is probably consensus on the bulk of issues. The driver for people, regardless of what angle they come from, is health. The Chief Medical Officer raised the concern that, if we move to take the children of healthcare workers out of the system, that will have a detrimental impact on health provision. I appreciate that many schools have closed, but we are working on special provision for when school closures happen officially. We are working on having some level of catering, support and care for the children of healthcare workers who want to avail themselves of it. That is critical.

What was your second point?

Ms Mullan: Has there been a directive?

Mr Weir: I want to see whether that, too, can be wrapped up in a wider package, but we have been working with the Public Health Agency on drafting advice. It is fairly clear that what we say to people will be compatible with what was announced on Monday. For instance, if a teacher or student is pregnant, the advice is that they self-isolate. Therefore, school is not the place for them. Similarly, that applies to a range of vulnerable groups and staff.

The simple reference to "vulnerable groups" on Monday means that there is a bit of work to be done. The PHA is working to provide a clear definition. For instance, as I understand it, the particular risk during pregnancy is in the third trimester. However, as was indicated, the advice is for anyone who is pregnant. If there is an overly cautious approach, we should take it when it is compatible with medical advice.

Ms Mullan: If we are to put people's health first, we need a clear directive from the Department in order to protect staff and children, those who are pregnant and those who have underlying conditions. Catherine made a point about those driving school buses today.

Mr Weir: I understand that. Throughout this period, the permanent secretary, officials in the Department and I have been working with Department of Health officials, who, to be fair, have produced an awful lot of work. We have, for example, been working with them since Monday night, including over St Patrick's Day. Guidance is being produced by the PHA. Rightly, it wants to ensure that everything in that guidance is completely correct. It is also important that, if there is a wider package of measures, it can be included as part of that. We will be very clear with schools on that issue.

Ms Mullan: At the minute, teachers and parents feel that they are being given different advice. They are being told to go to work and into classrooms. We talk about the PHA's advice on social distancing, which Catherine raised. It is not possible to socially distance yourself from children in a classroom. There is a directive to put children into a room on their own if it is suspected that they have the virus. How do you do that with a four- or five-year-old? On 11 March, we heard from special school teachers who do not have a room or even a store cupboard to put those children in. I understand that you are working your way through the situation. However, you talked about people being frustrated. It is more than frustration. It is real worry and concern. People listened to the Prime Minister's announcements to the nation on the past two nights. In the 26 Counties, the Taoiseach made announcements. We seem to be giving conflicting information to schools here in the North.

I want to go back to the advice on social distancing in schools. There is a suspected case in a school in my city. I think that you will have seen that, Peter. The school has been told to remain open. What is the directive for schools in that situation?

Mr Weir: I am not aware of the individual case. We can certainly pursue that directly after the meeting.

Ms Mullan: What is the directive if a school has a suspected case? Should it close?

Mr Baker: We take advice from the Public Health Agency on that. I do not want to get into the specifics, because I do not know what the circumstances are. Is it a positive case?

Ms Mullan: What is the directive for any school?

Mr Baker: Is it a suspected case?

Ms Mullan: It is suspected.

Mr Baker: We take advice from the Public Health Agency on whether it should close.

Ms Mullan: If it were a positive case?

Mr Baker: The Public Health Agency would advise on that as well. We take a decision, along with the Education Authority and the managing authorities, on individual schools. Schools are applying for closures and exceptional closures. All will be looked at on their merits and on the basis of individual cases.

Ms Mullan: Do you know how many schools have applied for training days in order to close for the rest of the week?

Mr Baker: I do not have the figure as of today. It will probably be different today from yesterday or the day before that.

Mr Weir: Clearly, as we move towards the point at which there are school closures, however we move forward precisely, there will be a need to prepare. Many schools have availed themselves of the opportunity to do specific preparation, and many are well ahead. There will need to be an opportunity for schools that have not done that to be able to avail themselves of time to do so as we move forward, in whatever format that happens. That will be part of a wider position that we hope to develop.

Ms Mullan: If boards of governors take a decision to go ahead and close schools, will there be any repercussions?

Mr Weir: That right does not lie directly with boards of governors. It would require a range of things across the board, including legislation. Across government, greater powers would be given in order to be able to direct the situation. We all have to be flexible as we move ahead. That will mean flexibility of response across the broad public sector. In the microcosm of the Department of Education, we have redirected quite a number of staff to those specific aspects. Depending on how circumstances work out, many workers will need to be redeployed in order to be able to provide assistance where it is needed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, may I just check whether you have the legal powers to close schools?

Mr Weir: Let me put it this way: strictly speaking, if there was a, I think, a directive given —. I think we don't actually —. We —.

Mr Baker: The Department could issue directions to schools to do basically anything. However, as you are probably aware, there is a Coronavirus Bill, with a wide range of emergency powers, that will probably be enacted in Westminster very soon, and that will give the Government wide powers across all sectors, including the education sector, to issue directives to do just about anything, depending on what the contingency is.

I just want to pick up on Ms Mullan's point about the repercussions for schools. We are in extraordinary times. School boards of governors and school leaders act in good faith. We know that. They are very responsible, concerned individuals, and we will be pragmatic with them. We cannot envisage each and every circumstance, but we are not going to take a non-pragmatic approach to this and get into conflict with school boards of governors and school leaders on the issue. That is my view as a permanent secretary, and maybe I am speaking out of turn with the Minister, but this is not the time to be running up against people who are doing a very difficult job at the coalface in difficult circumstances, and I understand that, OK? You can read into that what you want.

Mr Weir: Can I also —?

Ms Mullan: It is the main question that I have been asked, I have to say.

Mr Weir: I understand that.

Mr Baker: I know that there are colleagues from the teaching unions sitting behind me here, and they can read into that what they want, too.

Mr Weir: On the Bill that is going through Westminster —. Across the Executive as a whole —. Obviously, the normal format of such a Bill is that particular clauses will apply to Northern Ireland and some will not, some will apply to Scotland etc. At least in terms of the opportunity for — and it can then be triggered in Northern Ireland. Anything that the Departments have asked to have in the Bill, and anything that has the opportunity to be applicable to Northern Ireland, has been accepted. I think that the full Executive position has been accepted by legislative counsel and by the Government there. That does not necessarily mean that things will be done on a range of things, but it means that, if something needs to be done, there will not be the want of authority to be able to do that as we move forward.

Mr Baker: I will give you a specific example — I do not want to labour the point — about the kinds of powers. If we needed to do something drastic to move examination centres around to facilitate GCSEs and A levels, and maybe to enable pupils to do exams in different locations, we would have the power to direct that to happen. It is just to cover every conceivable contingency.

Ms Mullan: Finally, youth centres and childcare settings have said that they are not receiving clear guidance and advice. I know that this is moving by the hour, not the day, but they have contacted us as well, so can we get that advice out?

On Monday, we raised with you, Minister, the query about a EA staff directive not to go into schools. I know that staff are being directed in other areas. Has the Department also directed its staff not to go into schools? Is there a separate arrangement for school staff?

Mr Baker: First of all, as we speak — well, the meeting is probably over now — there is work going on about what Civil Service staff across the board should and should not do. It is in the same vein as some of the advice and guidance to teaching and non-teaching staff in the wider education sector. Hopefully, that advice will be consolidated. There is no directive, as it stands, about Department of Education staff going into schools or engaging with schools. That said, I have already explained that we are withdrawing from all non-essential work, and that might mean that we are not going near schools.

As the Minister mentioned, we have stood down, with immediate effect, all school inspections. However, inspection staff and district inspectors out there in communities, whilst they will not now be doing inspections, are more than happy to engage with schools to assist them in the work that they are doing to prepare for distance learning and, indeed, to share good practice across schools — what is happening in one district and what might be applied in another. We will redeploy them, and the full inspectorate will be redeployed to see where it can add value in dealing with all the contingencies that arise, wherever that might be. It is another resource that is being freed up.

Ms Mullan: Thank you.

Mr Butler: I am sure that you will join me in genuinely thanking all our teachers for working in very —.

Mr Weir: Indeed, Robbie, and that includes all of our staff throughout the education system. I know that some representatives of the teachers' unions are sitting behind me. I am very grateful for the work that teachers and principals have done. That extends to all those who work in schools and youth and childcare settings. It is important not to ignore any of those people.

Mr Butler: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of a school in Lisburn. Very often, teachers and governors have to carry out the role of a mini-politician with regard to the interface with concerned parents and other stakeholders and agencies and the impact that all of these things have. Not to steal anyone else's phrase, we are in uncharted territory, and I have sympathy with everybody's point of view. The reality is that there are no experts on this. The PHA, the Chief Medical Officer, the Minister of Health and the Minister for the Economy are doing their best, as are you. I actually think our First Minister and deputy First Minister are also doing their best.

The reality is that every one of us has children or relatives who are or will be affected. This is the moment, genuinely, when we have to come together. We are genuinely getting there, so I thank you for coming here and I do not envy you your position. You could not be paid enough to make the decisions that you are making. I think the Committee's line of questioning has, so far, been constructive. We are moving very rapidly to the point where some people, perhaps, know where we are going. I would like to put on record my thanks for some of the information that you have given us today, which, I think, possibly, has been missed. It is not that it has not been there. Sometimes, accessing the information and knowing where to find it is the hard bit.

The reality is that about 12% of our population is children in primary schools. You have already touched on the conditions that may pertain when you take them out of school, which will have an effect. I do not want to labour the point — I will get to a question — but I was once a firefighter, and my wife was a nurse. When our two kids were of primary-school age, the reality was different then if schools had to close. Coronavirus has changed the playing field because of where they can go.

My question centres around the Executive's approach, as opposed to your own approach. You talked about civil contingency groups with regard to establishing suitable childminding provision. That is

going to be absolutely crucial. That is why this emergency planning and staged approach is vital so that we do not crash out sectors of our society, whether that is fiscal or social. My first question is about the direction that the Executive group are taking with this. Do you have confidence that the relevant departmental leads are bringing the information with regard to that? I get that it is wider than Education. You are the Minister of Education, and you have a voice in there. Is that receiving enough attention?

I am asking that because, while coronavirus is incredibly important, we have cancer patients, people who are suffering from cystic fibrosis and people who require urgent surgical attention. The wider societal wheel needs to keep turning, and that needs to be underpinned because those people are going to need suitable measures, not only for looking after their children but to protect them. Are you satisfied with the Executive's approach?

Mr Weir: While there may be some differences of opinion, there is clearly work going on to pull all that together. So that there is no confusion on the subject, we are looking at what can be provided for emergency workers. There are a range of actions and a lot of logistical work that needs to be done. I mentioned the civil contingencies group specifically as being the best vehicle for that. Part of that group's work will be to establish which group of workers this applies to. There are obviously a range of front-line hospital staff who are key to that, but there are other things. The aim will be to get each Department to identify that.

The civil contingencies group met for the first time last week, and it is meeting as we speak now. Had Derek and I not been here, we would have been at that meeting, but senior officials from the Department of Education are there. That group will comprise not only the Departments but a few relevant arm's-length bodies as well. Part of the aspect is that it is pretty obvious that you can identify a range of groups that it should obviously apply to, but are there other groups that are not being thought of? We need to make sure that we have a holistic picture. There will then need to be an exercise to establish what is needed from the point of view of parents who have applicable children. Clearly, not everybody is in that emergency situation. For example, a few years ago, that would have applied to you, but it does not now. We will then establish, if there is a demand, the level of that demand, and that will be tailored. One aspect of the civil contingencies group is to send a message to each of the Departments asking, "Can you identify particular groups?".

Mr Butler: Thank you, it is really important. New information is arriving almost — by the time we go out of here, something will have changed.

Mr Weir: That is right. There may well be some developments that all of us sitting here are not entirely aware of.

Mr Butler: Unfortunately, when Boris gave a speech the other night, almost instantly, some businesses closed. Certainly I know that, in Lagan valley and Lisburn, some nurseries and day-care centres are on the verge of turning the key to close their doors or are thinking about it. Some people have made huge investments in those businesses. That is a part of the civil contingencies jigsaw.

Mr Weir: It is.

Mr Butler: I am keen to point out that we all recognise that teachers are not childminders. They perform a different function.

Information on food poverty was shared earlier, and you also touched on counselling. We have been talking a lot about mental health. The reality is that social isolation is one of the most significant and negative unintended consequences, and perhaps there is going to be a spike in an already entrenched atmosphere of poor mental health across Northern Ireland. We have to think about that. Has there been any thought about not just counselling but contact?

Mr Weir: Some thought and some work is ongoing. We talk about trying to mitigate, but there is no ideal solution. Sometimes, you try to solve things and that takes you in different directions. Part of the stuff is that you want to have as little contact as possible, but then you try to engage. There will be major problems out there, beyond simply the Education piece, because of the need for isolation. I know that the police have expressed concern that, while the streets are empty, there may be less on-street crime, but a real danger that we may see domestic violence go through the roof. Families being closely confined could produce threats for children as well. There is a whole range of issues. You are right about social isolation and looking at the other end of the spectrum.

Mr Baker: This brings us back to the point that there is no good outcome to schools closing. Young people going to school every day, apart from the benefits of learning, have social contact, friendship, the extracurricular activities that schools do a fantastic job in, sport, music, art, school trips and everything that goes on. Those will stop. There is no way around that, if we are talking about isolation, and that will be lost.

That is a real worry, but, do you know what, for the life of me sitting here right now, I cannot see a sensible mitigation to that, right now, if we go into major social isolation. As a society, we will just have to deal with that somehow, and it is a real worry. I am afraid that that sounds like a bit of a counsel of despair, but it is one of the really negative consequences of schools closing.

Mr Weir: What will have some level of impact particularly on children as well is if you take a look at, for example, the social isolation that the elderly will face. Many of them will be in a situation where effectively they are confined to their homes and deprived of their families. That is the major social isolation impact for the elderly. To look at it the other way, from the point of view of children, there may be those who have very close relationships with their grandparents but are actually more or less kept at arm's length or well beyond that and are not able to visit them. There will be children who will not be able to visit relatives in nursing homes because they may well be in lockdown. There is a tsunami of major problems that society will be facing as a result of this. Some will be very tangible; some will be a lot more intangible. The storm is yet to come.

Mr Butler: Just one question —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will let you come back, Robbie. I am just intervening as well, though. Let us not sell short the innovative ability of our teaching and non-teaching staff to respond to that challenge. I am sure that we are all already witnessing multiple online learning fora and suggestions coming forward with regard to child education and good physical and mental health activity during this time. There is scope for a constructive response to those extremely challenging circumstances.

Mr Weir: You are right. To some extent, we have to be realistic and, where there are things that are not possible, we have to mitigate some of the problems and be honest about those. You are right: we also have to take the positive that, while a crisis of this nature sometimes brings out the worst in some people, it also brings out the best in people and can create a situation where some of the most innovative thinking arises out of that. We have to try to capture all of that.

Mr Butler: I have one question. I am going to finish that point, because this is really important. We were discussing it in 2016 when we had an Assembly, then we had three years of political failure, which has not helped us be battle-ready, shall we say. We talked about socially deprived areas when we discussed food poverty, and the eyes are on that, but that is also where mental health issues are even worse. I agree with the Chair, up to a point, that social media is brilliant and using technology is great, but, in the socially deprived areas, there will perhaps be less availability of iPads, telephones, broadband and stuff. We have to factor that in. I think it is an Executive response, by the way. Commitments have been made by the Executive with regard to their mental health group. I hope that that group is considering that at the moment and that you will be playing your part, Minister.

The final question is about teachers. Fourteen weeks from now roughly takes us up to the summer holidays, and then we have a two-month summer holiday. I would like the Minister to give confidence and comfort to teachers that any time lost during any extended periods will not affect their pay, their contributions, their pensions and things like that.

Mr Weir: To give confidence to anybody in the system, such as teachers and other members of staff, their pay will continue. Obviously the flip side will be that the teaching will carry on, albeit in a different form. There will be no disruption to continuity of service and no disruption to the financial aspects of things. I give that assurance beyond simply teachers.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How does that apply to non-permanent teaching and non-teaching staff such as substitute teachers, for example?

Mr Weir: If they are carrying on with the teaching side of it, they will continue to be paid. Depending on the circumstances, for those who are, for instance, on substitute lists, in some cases it will restrict opportunities and, in other cases, it will expand them.

Mr Baker: The overriding objective in all this will be fairness to all staff so that staff are not unfairly penalised because of circumstances beyond their control. We will look at all of that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie touched on contingency planning. Minister, you mentioned a COVID-19 group that you had established for contingency planning. Who sits on that group?

Mr Weir: There are two groups that we have been looking at. The senior staff and I met as a group, which also involved the CCEA. Additionally, the permanent secretary and I have established a group that involves representatives of each of the education sectors plus the Education Authority and CCEA so that those people are meeting regularly as well.

Mr Baker: There is a group involving all the main statutory partners and, indeed, our non-statutory partners in the sectoral bodies to share ideas and identify issues. The first meeting of the group was on Friday. It was really useful to hear colleagues from the different sectors suggest things that we need to look at and ideas for dealing with those. That will meet regularly and is in addition to the internal business contingency arrangements in the Department. Trade union colleagues, who are sitting behind us, would like to have a seat at that table, and I have no difficulty with that whatsoever because we need input from colleagues who are at the coalface. I want to talk to our trade union colleagues about ideas and suggestions on how they can continue to help us with their input.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sure that they would welcome that and perhaps ask why they were not there sooner.

Mr Baker: We convened the first meeting at really short notice, and it was, "Be there or be square". It was convened within less than a few hours, and it was not possible to get everybody who should have been there around the table. It is just the speed with which we are moving and a logistic issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Is there representation of special schools at that group?

Mr Baker: We do not have a sectoral body for special schools, but all special schools come under the control of the Education Authority. The Education Authority is there, and there is lots of representation there. We do not have separate representation from primary schools, post-primary schools or special schools, but we have all the managing authorities around the table, including non-statutory bodies like the Governing Bodies Association.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I make a suggestion, given that you asked for suggestions earlier? There is a special schools strategic leadership group. If you need me to make a stronger case for its inclusion in this, it is that you will be aware of the lack of confidence in the Education Authority with regards to the representation of special educational needs. I strongly encourage you to include the special schools strategic leadership group in that planning group, not least because of the significant number of special-school pupils who most likely find themselves, as it stands today, in an at-risk category for social isolation. Is that possible?

Mr Baker: I can see no reason why that is not possible. Thank you for that suggestion.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have one other suggestion. We have established, and Department of Education official Cathy Galway has engaged intensively with, an all-party working group on early education and childcare. It has extensive representation across childcare provision. I suggest early engagement with representatives from that collection of bodies as a matter of urgency. I am happy to assist with that if that is useful, given the centrality of childcare provision to this.

Mr Baker: That has already happened, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It has happened? That is super. That is great. OK.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Minister and permanent secretary, for coming before the Committee. I know that you are under huge pressure, so I thank you for taking the time to come today. I applaud the principals, teachers and teachers' unions for taking a measured approach and trying to act as one, which is very important in the midst of this crisis.

The UK Government have adopted a different approach to the rest of the world that is contrary to World Health Organization recommendations. Experts who have experience in Wuhan in China, and in Italy, say that adherence to this herd immunity approach is reckless and will cost lives. The whole world is social distancing, and you are telling us that it is OK to pack hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren into 30 by 30 classrooms, recognising that children are vectors. We know that children will probably survive and be able to cope with this virus if they get it, but it is about more than them; it is about the vulnerable people they come into contact with every day, such as parents and grandparents. How can expert medical and scientific advice be so different between Crossmaglen and Castleblayney? I have asked you that before, Minister. Please do not tell me that it is the same as between Larne and Stranraer. It is clear that the UK Government are making decisions in accordance with school terms in Britain, which are different to the school terms here. Can you give some clarity around that matter?

Mr Weir: No, school terms are, largely speaking —. There may be a slight variation on the odd day here and there, but, broadly speaking, they are the same. The one issue, particularly in England, is that the school term moves a little bit into July, but, broadly speaking, it is the same general format of an autumn/winter term, a spring term up to Easter and then a —.

Mr McNulty: The times are different. My understanding is that there is a quite significant difference in start and finish dates for school terms.

Mr Weir: Not to any great significant level, I would have thought. If, for the sake of argument, in 2020, schools started on 5 January here and 6 January somewhere else —. The reality is that there is a little bit of variation, sometimes to the frustration of parents, even between schools here, but there is not any level of significant difference. The only issue that that would potentially play into as we move ahead would be with some of the scenario planning around A levels, depending on what approach is taken to public examinations. Outside of that, I do not think that any of the term dates have any particular bearing on any thinking on that.

Mr McNulty: I stand to be corrected on that, Minister, but my understanding is that the school terms in the North are significantly different from those across the water.

Mr Weir: Presumably, certain term times will be different between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world. There will be a wide range of different dates, but again I am not sure that the term dates are particularly significant in any way in the timing of this.

Mr McNulty: OK. Principals, teachers and parents are already voting with their feet. Last night, the Taoiseach spoke about the calm before the storm. The storm is coming. In the throes of this crisis, we have already lost discipline and we are already not conforming with the direction being given from our leaders, our Ministers and our First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is happening already. When the storm arrives and we have lost that discipline and conformity of behaviour and calm, that discipline cannot be reinstated. I think that that is a consideration that needs to be thought about. We need social obedience as opposed to social disobedience, which can be impacted by these decisions around school closures.

Five teaching unions are imploring you to close. They recognise that this is a public health emergency, and they hope that you will hear them on that. Parents should not be left thinking that they have to make a judgement call, knowing that they have a vulnerable child at home or have a vulnerable adult or grandparents around the home. It needs to be called this week. Teachers need time alone in their classrooms to prepare lesson plans and book work for offline and online lessons away from school for their pupils. Schools have been empty now for a number of days, which means that schools are most likely safe places, and teachers who may have vulnerabilities feel safe going to that school if they remain closed. That is a very important consideration. As of next Monday, staff will not be turning up. Pregnant mothers were mentioned earlier; and vulnerable teachers and other vulnerable staff members will not be turning up. What sort of chaos will ensue because of that? Have you any faith in the UK Government's PHA modelling, given that it appears to be out of sync with the rest of the world? Who are you putting at risk by following the advice from that model?

I understand that the childcare issues, the issues around children with special needs, the issues around school meals and the issues around exams are all massive considerations and that there will be no perfect solutions. I know, permanent secretary, that you have said that there is no good outcome, but there is a good outcome to the schools closing. There is a good outcome to the schools closing if it saves lives. We have to put in place a plan that factors in bringing out the best in people,

and we can only achieve that by calmness. I believe firmly in adopting a universal approach across this island. The GAA has already exhibited that by opening up Croke Park, our HQ, for a drive-through testing facility. I think that we need calmness and a uniformity of approach across this island, and that is what people are crying out for from my perspective.

Mr Weir: If that were an exam question, it would finish with, "Discuss".

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): There were a few questions.

Mr Weir: There are a few questions in there. I agree with you about calmness. I think that that has not always been particularly displayed. Unfortunately, not all elected representatives have acted always entirely responsibly. You are right about preparation time, and a number of schools have used some of that already. There will need to be specific preparation time for teachers to be able to operate within schools to prepare some of those. I think that is without prejudice.

I made the point first of all that I do not have any particular doctrinaire view over where we follow. You say that there are good outcomes. I think that any outcome that is pursued is not wholly watertight. Any option that is pursued will have negatives as well as positives. It is a question of where you see the balance in that. It is not the case, for example, that if you close schools, that is simply a positive outcome that is entirely risk-free. No, there is a downside to doing that. It is a question of working out where the balance lies within those.

You mentioned herd immunity. To be fair even to the UK Government, I do not think that they have ever used that term. It is not something that in any way motivates, or, indeed, is a view that is shared by, the Executive or me. The specific decisions that have been taken have been taken on the basis of the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. The Chief Medical Officer will be in close liaison with his counterparts in the rest of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. If the Chief Medical Officer makes a recommendation that puts us in a different place from London, Cardiff, Edinburgh or Dublin, in one sense, I do not really care whether, for any political reason, we are in step or out of step with anybody. I will take the very professional advice from our own experts that is there and try to make that advice compatible.

As I said, it is about trying to take the best decisions that ultimately save lives. We are in a fluid situation, so advice about what the best balance is will be changing, and I will move with that. It is important that as much certainty and preparation time as possible be given to people, and providing that has to be based on the conditions that are there, and that is what we will be seeking to do across the board as we move ahead. I cannot remember whether that answers all the questions that you asked.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am conscious that we are almost out of time. Justin, I am happy to bring you back in if you want to ask a brief supplementary question. We will then have William and Robin.

Mr Weir: Sorry, but I should tell you that different Governments throughout the world have taken slightly different approaches. They have taken different measures at different times, and different things are being done on either side of borders. It is erroneous to take the view that the UK is doing one thing and the rest of the world another. To do so is to take a slightly pejorative position. We can go only on the best advice that we can get. When all this is over, people may look back at things differently. We have to be very careful not to do something that brings about a short-term reduction and then think that that will be the end of the situation. With this virus, there is a danger that we will see second and third waves. Those factors have got to be taken into account when deciding what actions to take, and when to take them, in order to try to save as many lives as possible.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you both very much for your time today, because I am aware that you are both hugely busy and working in the most difficult of circumstances. I thank you both for the leadership that you are giving.

I am reassured somewhat to hear that decisions are being taken on the basis of medical and scientific advice from professional experts. That is important. We have more experts on this issue than we had on Brexit, if we go by social media. Decisions should not be taken on the basis of political dogma, or by politicians trying to grab headlines. The clarity and consistency of the message is absolutely important. Mixed messages are highly dangerous and grossly irresponsible. I have no time for

politicians or anyone else who cannot stick to a message, because that is so irresponsible in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Derek, you talked earlier about the community sector. I had some phone calls yesterday from people who are working in the community sector about their fears for the continuation of jobs, projects and roles, as well as about the threat to the community sector itself. In fact, I am going to a meeting this afternoon on some of those issues. Can you expand on how those people might be deployed? If you cannot do so today, will you make us aware of how they might be deployed to the kind of work that you were talking about to alleviate problems and pressures?

Mr Baker: Yes. I cannot go into detail, because I have not seen the detail. It is conceptual at this stage. You are absolutely right. The community and voluntary sector is very strong, probably right across Northern Ireland. There are people working in specific communities who have resources and can reach out to vulnerable people and families. You know that best from your own constituency. We work with some of those organisations in the wider educational field. For example, could we envisage a situation in which meals are prepared at a central location but voluntary and community groups that reach out to individual families are used to distribute them, rather than large numbers of young people being brought to one location? We are looking at that option. It is one model.

We heard overnight about additional funding that will be available to the Executive. I do not want to put a bid in just yet, but, as we speak, all Departments are looking at how they could use additional funding for various mechanisms.

As the Minister said, the issue of school meals is an interesting one. Most of the funding goes on the staff who prepare and distribute those meals. We do not want to disadvantage them, so it is not just a case of taking all the money spent on the school meals service and giving it to another group. We could take only a small portion of that money if we want to preserve the security of those staff. If additional money is available, who knows? We might be able to give it to organisations to mobilise to deliver school meals at a local community level. That is only one option.

As I am sure colleagues behind me did, I heard a school principal on last night saying that schools could continue to provide school meals and, following a social isolation approach, bring in small numbers of pupils to access them. I do not know whether that is practicable, but we need to look at all those things.

Mr Humphrey: I am aware of sports clubs and football teams in my constituency doing such work, and flute bands as well.

Minister, you said, as did the First Minister, that it is not a case of whether schools close, but when. I declare an interest as a governor of two schools. I was speaking the other night to the principal of a secondary school in north Belfast who rang me. Preparation and time are key. People need to prepare for home education or whatever might unfold. Circumstances will be different across Northern Ireland. When it comes to preparation for teachers, staff, parents, childcare providers and childminders, time is of the essence. School closures cannot be announced one day and come in the next. Can you expand on that?

Mr Weir: There are two aspects to how things would be phased: when we reach that point and when the evidence is there.

As you say, it cannot simply be a situation in which an announcement is made one day and the school closes the next. You need some lead-in time, particularly initially for parents to make their own arrangements. I have indicated on a number of occasions that parents need to be thinking ahead. Parents need to put in place particular care arrangements. Speaking as a carer, I know that that is not something that you can adjust at the drop of a hat. There has to be preparation.

The second phase — you can sequence these things — is to reach the point at which pupils cease going into school as part of the closure while allowing additional time beyond that for teachers to add to their preparation by way of lesson plans. There will be a bit of sense and flexibility shown around whether that is done through staff development, school development or exceptional closure.

There are two buffers that need to be applied before you reach the point of saying officially that a school is closed. Arising out of that is the question of what we do about broader teaching and care

arrangements, particularly for children whose parents work for the emergency services, as was mentioned. That would happen subsequently. It is best that we disaggregate the process a little bit.

Therefore, yes, there are routes around that.

Mr Baker: I will pick up on a point that Mr McNulty made. Even if schools were to close, it would not be the case that we put a big chain around school gates and they do not exist any more. We still have teachers who are being paid, and schools are not inherently unsafe places. Whatever about the preparation time, which is really important, and I accept your point entirely, there is a continuum here, whereby teachers can perhaps discuss how best to facilitate distance learning. I would be really keen to engage with our trade union colleagues about what is possible in that space and what can be done on an ongoing basis over the weeks ahead.

It is not a case of everything having to be done by day one. It is an ongoing thing.

Mr Humphrey: I pay tribute to governors, principals, teachers and staff across the education sector for the tremendous leadership, dedication and commitment that they are showing to the young people who are in their care.

Mr Newton: I echo William's words. I really appreciate Peter and Mr Baker taking the time to come to the Committee. I can only imagine the pressure that you are under, so thank you for coming along today. This has been said already, but if we are to succeed — I nearly said "win", but there will not be any winners in this situation — we need a united approach across all sectors of education and politics.

I have a couple of minor questions. Some schools in my constituency have been doing excellent work with pupils who are finding school life difficult. In this very difficult situation, it is important to pay some attention to how, in this new and evolving situation, we might support those children who, at the moment, get support in school so that, to use your words, Mr Baker, they do not fall through the cracks. When schools do close, can you describe what activity would be like over the period until we were back to normal education?

Mr Weir: Robin, the position is to try to ensure that teaching and learning continue through using some of the packs that will be available and some of the online resources. Robbie Butler mentioned that, in deprived communities, there may not be the same access to computers and internet resources. From my 45-minute stint as Economy Minister the other week, I know that there is major concern about broadband provision, particularly in some rural areas in the west of the Province. Schools will be looking at the logistics of having a cocktail of provision, but the aim will be to carry on online teaching of the curriculum in the best possible way.

One area that will inevitably be highly, if not entirely, restricted is practical classes that cannot be fulfilled at home. In that context, the plan will have to be fairly adaptable, but we want to ensure as far as possible that children do not miss out on their education, even if it is for just a few months.

Mr Newton: When it comes to the awarding body making decisions on examination results and so on, I imagine, but tell me if I am wrong, that we may not meet the criteria for grades A, B, C etc as well as we might have done otherwise.

Mr Weir: To be fair, CCEA has done quite a bit of work on that. Some of this will be determined by the timing, but if you have a situation for which a range of options is being pursued, of which one is that exams do not physically take place and, instead, there are other ways of doing that, can you have a methodology that is as robust as sitting an exam? There is an argument that you probably cannot. However, there is a reasonable level of confidence. It is something that happens to pupils already on a much smaller scale. There can be a range of reasons why pupils cannot sit particular exams, so it is not as if we are in entirely uncharted waters.

As both Derek and I have indicated, one of the particular issues will be how compatible we are with the wider UK's awarding bodies' qualifications system. It is clear that, whatever methodology is eventually arrived at, the universities are in a good place to say that they will accommodate students and recognise grades awarded. It will not be a question of CCEA or any other body saying, "Here is what we are doing" and that then not being recognised by a particular university. It will be part of a wider picture, and we have to get consistency there.

Mr Baker: I will add just one point to that, Mr Newton. In its contingency planning for what may happen, CCEA's overriding objective is fairness to pupils, and that is shared right across the United

Kingdom. Although decisions on what happens locally will be taken by the Minister of Education, it will be a joint decision taken right across the four UK countries by their respective Education Ministers.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Committee will receive evidence from CCEA in the near future. I am confident that we can create a way forward for completion of examinations. There are potentially more urgent considerations.

Mr Weir: Although there are major challenges with examinations and a lot of other things, the broad educational issues are ultimately solvable. They may not be done in as perfect a way as they are able to be done, but they are solvable. As a number of members have said, the bigger issue is the impact on health.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Karen Mullan, would you like to come back in briefly? I will then call Justin McNulty. Please keep your closing remarks brief.

Ms Mullan: On that final point, I have been told that, on Monday, a third of children did not attend school, and we are hearing that we expect that number to rise as parents vote with their feet. Those are children who are at home at the minute without education provision.

I will now speak as a mother and not as a politician trying to grab a headline. I have a 15-year-old daughter, and the more that I hear, the more that I think that she will be staying at home, because her health comes first. What education provision will be put in place for those children?

Mr Weir: We want to work on an overall package. Schools should be providing even now for pupils who are at home. Although the scale is greater, it is not a unique situation, but we want to work to a situation in which we get an overall package for everybody.

Mr Baker: It will be on a school-by-school basis, however, because school leaders and individual teachers are best placed to know what is appropriate for their classes and what facilities are available. Schools have already been doing excellent planning in that regard, within the constraints under which they are operating.

Mr McNulty: Why is the civil contingencies group meeting only now? Did it not see this coming?

Mr Weir: I think that there has been ongoing work among Departments. Today's is not its first meeting. There have been other meetings. Certainly, there was a meeting last week. The point that I was making is that all Departments are represented at today's meeting, and had the Education Committee not been sitting, Derek and I would have been at the meeting too, but we have senior departmental officials at it in our place.

Mr Baker: It met last week too, by the way.

Mr McNulty: When was the first time that it met?

Mr Baker: It met on Thursday for the first time as a civil contingencies group.

Mr Weir: Although it may not have met in that format before then, that is not to say that there have not been ongoing discussions between different Departments and arm's-length bodies. With coronavirus, we have all found that part of the problem is the speed of change. It has been the challenge to everybody in public life, not just here but in different parts of the world.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have a couple of closing questions. First, are you assured that, having asked them to remain open, there are adequate materials — for example, handwash — in all schools across Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: We raised that issue earlier this week and, indeed, yesterday. The Education Authority will ensure that all schools that need access to such materials get them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Will you double-check that?

Mr Baker: I will.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have received accounts of schools very close to home that may need assistance with getting future supplies of materials to ensure hygiene standards. I would be grateful if you can follow that up.

Mr Weir: We will follow up on the general issue, but if there are particular issues with specific schools, we will bring them up directly with the EA.

Mr McNulty: News just breaking from Westminster is that only MPs listed in the Order Paper will be allowed into the Commons Chamber. We are saying that only MPs listed in the Order Paper will be allowed into the Commons Chamber, yet we are saying that schoolchildren should go back to school.

Mr Weir: Generally speaking, Justin, MPs do not require a parent who works in the front-line medical service to look after them, so there are differences.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will try to help you get to a close, Minister. We must seek as much clarity as we can in closing. You have said that schools will close, but you cannot say when. You say that closure will be based on conditions. Can you say what those conditions are?

Mr Weir: No. There will be work done to try to get to a broader situation in which there can be clear agreement. As I say, the situation is fluid. The conditions are supported by clear medical advice. I am not going to jump to a position outside of that medical advice. Anything that is done will be compatible with medical advice.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. My closing remarks are that personal responsibility, a united approach and clear messaging have been cited as absolutely vital to help us protect as many people as we can from the worst effects of this virus. It is irrefutable that there are hundreds of schools across Northern Ireland unable to or deciding not to accept your messaging on the matter. That is observable fact.

I do not doubt your sincerity and integrity, or your commitment to protecting staff and pupils, but, as of today, you are asking school leaders and parents to respond to an increasingly unacceptable and untenable situation in our schools. There is significant confusion and concern, and I think that you need to establish, and urgently, a date for school closure and to set out a much clearer plan for the wide range of contingency provision that will be necessary.

Mr Weir: I entirely take on board what you have said, Chair. Actions compatible with the broader medical advice will be followed. As with all these things, any actions that any of us takes will be, by their nature, imperfect. If any of us can make a contribution that reduces the impact of this or helps save a single life, it will be worthwhile. I can only go on the best advice that I can get.

I agree that, as we chart a way ahead, the more certainty that is there, and the more that we can phase the timing to indicate when there will be dates for closures, the better. There will be a point at which schools will not be taking in pupils, and then there can be a period of additional preparation done by staff. Part of any picture will have to be the impact on front-line medical and emergency staff. A bit of work will be done to ensure that there is provision made. Moreover, all the other issues that have been raised will be addressed as best they possibly can.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Earlier, mention was made of a COVID-19 emergency Bill. If you need this Committee to reconvene at urgent notice, we give you our full commitment to doing so.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. The issue will be enactment. Obviously, there will be discussions between the Executive and the Assembly. Consent to the Bill may be given by way of a legislative consent motion. Our focus is on education, but the Bill covers matters that will involve each of the Departments. Some provisions will be Department-specific, while others will be more generic in nature. I very much appreciate the offer. If there is any additional briefing that we need to give, I am sure that officials can do it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am conscious that we have rescheduled the response to the systemic failure in EA over special educational needs provision. We will return to that as soon as possible. I ask you, as Minister, to give particular consideration to the additionally high concern and confusion that is apparent in special schools at the moment.

Mr Weir: I am acutely aware of that, and I am working with the PHA directly. If something can be announced in a wider context, that route is preferable. If we cannot do that, something very specific will be announced for vulnerable children.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister and permanent secretary, thank you.