



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Coronavirus Response Update:
Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education

8 April 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
Mr John Smith	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Minister, the permanent secretary, and the deputy secretary are here to provide an oral update on the Department's response to coronavirus via a remote link. May I confirm that we have Peter Weir, MLA, Minister of Education; Derek Baker, permanent secretary, Department of Education; and John Smith, deputy secretary, Department of Education, with us this morning? You are very welcome.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I am here, and Derek, the permanent secretary, is with me. John is on another line, but all of us are available.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, thank you. By way of opening remarks, Minister, I thank you and the Department for the work that you are doing in response to the COVID-19 emergency. I know the sincerity of your commitment to the task and that of your Department, having spoken to you in person on a number of occasions, and I thank you for that. It has, however, been three weeks since you were able to provide an update in person to the Assembly or the Education Committee on the COVID-19 response. Therefore, I ask you, in the course of your remarks, to address whether it will be possible to have a more regular engagement with the Assembly and the Committee during this time of such unprecedented challenge for teachers, pupils and their families across Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: Chair —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sorry; I will just finish briefly, Minister. During this time, schools have closed, except to take in the children of key workers, and examinations have been cancelled. I have had the privilege of speaking to many teaching and non-teaching staff who have faced extremely

challenging and, frankly, traumatic situations as a result of those decisions. Many of them have been required to establish their own procedures and approaches to school closures and continuity of provision because of the timeliness of guidance and support.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland, who have responded to the emergency with courageous and innovative service and leadership. I am glad, Minister, that you have an opportunity today to provide a clear in-person update on the action that you and your Department are taking to help our teachers, non-teaching staff, children and families to respond to this unprecedented situation. You are very welcome. I invite you to make some opening remarks to the Committee.

Mr Weir: OK, Chair. I will address a couple of those points and initially make this very brief. I want to give the Committee the opportunity to address a range of issues with the officials. First, I join you in your comments in welcoming the efforts in schools by teaching and non-teaching staff and the decisions of schools as a body corporate. In addition to the educational provision and the support that they have given to key workers' children and to vulnerable children, one thing that is very noticeable in the current situation is that, entirely off their own bat and, sometimes, through discussions with colleagues, a large number of schools have decided to think about what they can do to make an additional contribution to their local hospital and health service. We have seen schools, particularly post-primary schools, carrying out an inventory of the equipment that they have — masks, aprons and various bits of equipment — and donating them to hospitals. That is very much in the true public spirit that we have seen developing.

As you can probably appreciate, events have been developing quickly. There have been peaks and troughs of activity, and that has been one level of restriction. A number of items have still to be brought to fruition on which there is work ongoing. We are probably moving, from an educational point of view, towards a slightly more settled phase in which a lot of the initial activities start to bear dividends and work their way through the system. That will probably mean fewer demands on the time of a number of us, who will be able to answer to the Committee; certainly, I will be more able to do that. I do not want to encourage the Clerk to think of 87 things to ask us in terms of correspondence. I will try to make myself as available as possible, and, unless *[Inaudible]* will try to get along to each briefing session with the Committee. Specifically, I will speak tomorrow to the Assembly as a body corporate through the Ad Hoc Committee. I think that the way that that has been organised by the Executive as a whole is not quite to provide a rotation of Ministers but to try to get Ministers to give a range of updates. To that extent, although timing is not entirely within my gift, I will do that as regularly as possible.

As a broader update, a lot has, obviously, happened in the last few weeks. I know that the permanent secretary gave you a fairly extensive update last week and will also, in terms of the general comprehensiveness of the situation, have given you a detailed breakdown of the various work streams in the Department. That covers all the main aspects of this, and it would probably be helpful if your questions probed on that.

As for the structural side, all aspects of the *[Interruption]* continue to work. We are ensuring close monitoring of all activities and, indeed, directing activities that either we as a Department need to do or that we need to work on with others to deliver. We hold a regular meeting once a day with all the main officials, generally speaking by way of remote communication. We deal particularly with what is emerging in the wider picture in terms of the broad contingency planning side of things across the Department. We deal with any issues with legislation, and we deal with outstanding actions and the general work stream. That goes on daily.

Among the things that we will probably touch on are a number of items that are work in progress. I want to highlight — I know that the Committee has had the different elements of this — issues that are not legislation but arise out of legislation, and we have issued a couple of notices on those. One gives a direct legal authority for the redirection of money for free school meals. I am sure that people will come on to that. What we have allocated and got budgetary funding for is to redirect the money that would normally be spent on free school meals so that it goes directly to everyone who is entitled to a free school meal. Although Communities has been leading on that and we have been working with them on it, it is largely on that element of it that DE has been funded. That is in addition to the funding of staff who would normally have been paid as part of that process. They continue to be paid. That was one of the notices.

Unfortunately and inevitably, the second area on which there has been a big impact in the current situation is the practical issue of statementing and special educational needs (SEN). As for notices of

which we have notified you, the Department is under a duty to deliver the assessment process. That is our hope and aim, but, in dealing with the legal practicalities, there has been a change in the wording of the notices to the Department using its "best endeavours" to deliver assessments, because some of the work required during the broad statementing process is not compatible with the coronavirus situation. That is not something that any of us would want to do, but it is covered by the notice.

Beyond that, the permanent secretary, the deputy permanent secretary and I are all happy to discuss whatever issues you and the Committee want to go through. That might be the most productive way of proceeding.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Thanks, Minister. As you referenced, the permanent secretary provided us informally with a detailed update last Wednesday, with particular reference to the six work streams. Thank you for your update today as well. It is best to proceed via questions from members, so I will go straight in and ask the Deputy Chair, Karen Mullan, if she would like to ask a question.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, permanent secretary and John for attending today to give us more of an update, as the situation keeps evolving. I will ask all my questions at the start, because I am working remotely and I probably will not get back in again. I will try my best to get through them.

Minister, on the update that we received, we have all probably been in touch with you in relation to substitute teachers' pay. You referenced the hardship fund that the Department was looking at. Will you give us further detail on it? I know that you are considering all options, so would you consider making payments based on average earnings or looking at the 80% retention scheme being introduced by the Government as well?

Mr Weir: Sorry, Karen, I thought that you were going to ask all your questions and that we would respond to them, or do you want to take —?

Ms Mullan: I do not mind.

Mr Weir: I can certainly start off by answering that one. Yes, the Department has put forward proposals in relation to that, and they are with the Department of Finance, I think, in terms of the scoping exercise. I should clarify the position for substitute teachers. Broadly speaking, from a practical point of view, they fall — it is a slightly invisible division — into two categories with regards to pay. There are those who have been on what you might describe as "short-term contracts" who were directly in employment by schools at the time that schools went into a reduced phase — that is probably the most accurate way to describe it, in many cases — or were not open at all. We have guaranteed that contracts continue for anybody who is under contract. That includes canteen staff, teachers and classroom assistants. Similarly, it includes staff employed under the contract that EA is operating; so, for example, if you are involved in school transport as a bus driver or a taxi driver, the money should be there for you. It includes that cadre. Roughly speaking, although the costs are slightly less for a minority of the substitute side of it, half of the substitution costs are therefore directly guaranteed for those schools. If somebody has been covering for maternity leave or long-term illness, they are effectively covered.

Ms Mullan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Weir: I understand that, Karen. Separately, we have been drafting up proposals. I think that the elements that you outlined will very much lie at the heart of the detail of our proposals. There is one fairly significant caveat to be added at the end of this. The current position would be drawing on what level of work that teacher had done. Effectively, the turnover point is the last three months of the school year compared with the first three months. For instance, we would look in any scheme at, effectively, the average amount of work that was done in the period from January to March, and people's entitlement would be based on that. There are proposals that would be in and around the 80%-type situation.

The proposals would exclude those who are continuing with a full contract, because they are already covered. Although the opportunities for substitute teachers will be, almost by definition, incredibly less than they have been, to make up that money, some substitute teachers will pick up some bits of work on a casual basis. We will probably get into talking about volunteering later. One of the messages that we have been sending to schools on the process side is this: if you cannot fill staffing from your own staff or, indeed, in cooperation with another school, before you start making a central appeal for

volunteers, look at what availability there is for substitutes. There is still the opportunity for schools to bring in substitutes. The scheme would probably discount any earnings that would be made through that. The other area that it would discount is the small cadre of substitute teachers who are retired and are already on a teacher's pension, roughly 5% of the overall number. If a scheme is put in place, those people would not be paid twice from the public purse.

The one caveat to add to all of this, Karen, is that this would add up to a considerable amount of money. The only way that it is affordable, certainly on the basis of that proposal, is if the Executive and the Department of Finance sign off on it. We have put in proposals, and, to be fair, there are different tranches of money that are getting spent by the Executive and are being green-lighted by the Department of Finance. We have not yet got a green light for the proposals on substitute teachers. It remains to be seen whether we will get a green light, because, while a large amount of money has been made available to the Executive, particularly by way of Barnett consequentials, there are very large demands on that. It is not simply a question of making a vague proposal and getting sign-off from DOF. It has to be prioritised by DOF, by the Finance Minister and by the Executive, and, clearly, there will be question marks over whether, ultimately, that will happen. We have put that in as one of our bids.

Ms Mullan: That is brilliant. Thank you, Minister —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sorry, Karen. Just before you go to your next question, could I say that we have nine members who wish to ask questions this morning? I have watched other Committees find it really challenging to get through all the questions that they would like to get through in this format. This is not just at you, Karen, by any means — in fact, your question was very concise — it is for the members and the Minister. Please err on the side of extremely concise questions and answers.

Mr Weir: In fairness to the vice Chair, that is a lot more my fault than hers. Given the significance *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that, Minister. In effect, the question was about an update on progress on a hardship payment for non-employed substitute teachers. That was a concise question and was well put: we need concise answers as well, Minister. I do not mean to be harsh, but, in this format, we need to stick to the question.

Mr Weir: It is perfectly *[Inaudible]* criticism, Chair.

Ms Mullan: I will ask the next couple of questions together. Some of them will be points rather than questions. The first one is about an update on personal protective equipment. Will there be a supply to schools for teachers and volunteers?

Catherine will cover the childcare stuff, but I want to raise a couple of other points with you, Minister. The Department had asked principals to compile and complete volunteer forms. Yesterday, the Education Authority sent them out to principals to complete, so a bit of duplication seems to be happening. As you will be aware, teachers and, particularly, principals are very busy and very stressed at the moment. We hear that 200 childcare places are available through the Belfast Trust and there is still a need to ask schools to be open. Yesterday, I visited schools here in the city, and they are all working very hard to provide support to pupils and families. It is vital that principals, in particular, get a break over Easter. This will be a very long period, and I ask the Department and the Education Authority to take that into account and to review what requests and correspondence will be asked of them over the next week or so. I understand that we are in an emergency situation and people need to be on hand, but they need a break. I ask for that to be considered. They are all still in school when, naturally, some of them would already be off for Easter.

It is great that the money for free school meals is already getting out. However, one issue that has come up — you may be aware of it — is that of asylum seekers. I have been contacted by a school in Belfast that has 19 children from families who are asylum seekers. They do not have a bank account or provision to cash a cheque, and they have not received any payments as such. The principal has been advocating for them and has contacted the Education Authority, which has said that, as far as it knows — it is frustrated as well — the British Home Office is holding things up. I am not sure whether you are aware of that or working on it, but I would like an update on that.

Mr Weir: We will tag team those questions, Karen. *[Inaudible]* asylum seekers. Derek can deal with that. I will deal with a couple of the other issues first.

If there is any duplication where we are seeking information, we will try to iron that out. When it comes to giving teachers a break, we did provide advice. Sometimes, schools feel that, if they are open and providing that service, the principal has to be there. One of the things that we have made clear is that there needs to be somebody in charge, but that could be the principal, the vice principal or someone from the senior leadership team (SLT). In a lot of cases where schools are open, the number of pupils is minimal, so the principal does not need to be there all the time or for much of the time. A lot of schools have rotated their staff, and that should happen also with the senior leadership team. The only complication with having a break is that, if we are expecting a lot of the peak over the Easter period, there will be some days when, actually, the schools will be most needed to soak up the pressures from key workers. We will come on, at a later stage, to the way that it is done. However, a large number of schools came back to us effectively volunteering to be open over the Easter period, and some schools have volunteered to open over weekends as well. A lot of this is also being driven by a desire from the ground up to provide that.

I will deal with two other issues. You made a valid point on the childcare side of things. Again, we have a submission to Finance that will be dealt with very soon on a specific childcare scheme that my Department and the Department of Health have worked on. We are making a little adjustment to that, but we should be in a position to move forward on that very quickly, depending on Executive funding. I think that there will be a better story there soon.

You asked about PPE equipment. We have been working with the Public Health Agency (PHA), and we have given social distancing advice and more general stock. We have details of the PPE stock that has been obtained and now delivered by the Education Authority. For instance, of 18,343 bottles of hand sanitiser, about 5,500 have been delivered. A large number of those bottles have just recently arrived, and they will be delivered as well. About 2,500 gloves have been delivered, and, again, there is more stock available. We have about 60 face shields, 5,000 disinfectant wipes, about 180 *[Inaudible]* containers of disinfectant and 32,000 aprons delivered to schools. As you can probably appreciate, with a lot of the stock initially, across the board, Health took priority. I understand that the stock that has come from London is entirely for Health. There has been procurement through the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) for non-health, and we have got our share of that. EA is delivering that, and it has *[Inaudible]* an ongoing process. I will bring Derek in on free school meals.

Mr Derek Baker (Department of Education): Good morning Karen. It is Derek here.

On free school meals, as you know, we had about 97,000 children to cover. In the first wave, we were able to get the money out very quickly, because we had bank account details for over 94,000. Then we tried to communicate with parents whose bank account details we did not have, and that captured most of the rest. You are absolutely right: there is a small number of children — measuring in the hundreds — in the categories of asylum seekers and, perhaps, Roma and Travellers whom we have not been able to contact or to get bank account details for. We are engaged with the Department for Communities in the context of Minister Harghey's efforts to get food parcels delivered, so that we can identify those children and their addresses and get food to them. That work is under way. We have not forgotten those people, and asylum seekers are a specific group that we are targeting. We are not dependent on anything from the Home Office, unless we are dealing directly with DFC.

Ms Mullan: *[Inaudible]* seems to have a high number of children. Should I tell them to get in contact with the Department directly?

Mr Baker: Yes. I am happy for that to happen, Karen. As I said, we are engaged with DFC, so, if they want to get in touch with the Department directly, that is fine.

Ms Mullan: No problem. I will double-check that.

I raised a point with you last week and have had correspondence back about the pathway fund. Yesterday, I got correspondence about the process. Minister, I appeal to you to reconsider the forward planning for the pathway fund. Your correspondence highlights that the pathway funds services for the most vulnerable children and that the staff funded through it are childcare workers and preschool workers. As we know, preschools and crèches are closed, and the childcare sector is nearly decimated. They are some of our lowest-paid staff and have no opportunity to apply for another job. If these organisations lose that funding at this time, there is no other option left to them. I appeal to you,

Minister, to allow the funding to roll on during this period. Then, after this period, look at the process. *[Inaudible]* people into further poverty.

Mr Weir: There are two points in relation to that. On a broader level, we are mindful of sustainability, particularly of childcare providers; indeed, a large element of the proposal that we have with the Department of Health is based on (a) sustainability and (b) trying to help providers to stay open and provide a service to key workers.

On the broad element of third-party organisations and pathways, the final details were worked out at the start of the budget period. The intention for the overall quantum, be it on pathways or other third parties, is to roll over and try to make sure that there are no reductions in the overall amount that is spent. So, if organisation A has been receiving half a million pounds for something, the aim is that, for 2021, it would continue to receive that half a million pounds. If we continued, given the overall context of the budget, I do not think that we would be able to give comfort to those third-party organisations in the very near future, but there is no intention to make any cutbacks or anything of that nature.

Ms Mullan: There may be a bit of confusion about that. For example, a community crèche received a letter *[Inaudible]* lost its funding. Quite a number of others have contacted me. *[Inaudible]* they do not know whether to make their staff redundant *[Inaudible]* or whether they should keep paying them *[Inaudible.]* They definitely need some *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Weir: You were breaking up there quite a bit. We have guaranteed to everybody in the sector, including third-party organisations, that this is rolling forward. The issue will be with the 2021 budget, but there is no intention to have any cuts in that. It probably means, in certain sectors, that increased money is unlikely. I cannot deal directly with individual cases. The money for pathway will be there next year. It will be at least the same amount that is there at present. It will be the same for other organisations that have received earmarked funding. There are other priorities in the budget. A lot of pathway funding came via the confidence and supply arrangement. The Department did not get all that we were looking for. We got probably a little over half of the funding that we asked for, but we regard that sort of funding as a priority, and the aim is to keep the funding as is.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Minister, members, I will intervene here. We cannot continue with this length of questions and answers and expect to get through everyone. Are you finished, Karen?

Ms Mullan: That's me done, Chair, thank you.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister and Derek for joining us today. I know that you are very busy, Minister. I have inundated you with things over the last few weeks, and I appreciate the swiftness of your answers, given the challenges.

I want to pick up on a few things. I will follow on from Karen's question. Last week, Derek mentioned that the Department had received revised advice that suggested that there was no need for PPE in schools. Given what you have said today, Minister, have you gone against that advice and decided that it is necessary to put PPE into schools? Is only some PPE needed in schools?

Mr Weir: The PPE equipment involves hand sanitisers and a very limited number of masks. We will, as we have always told schools that we would, directly follow PHA advice. I think that its advice will suggest that, in many cases, there is not a specific need for certain pieces of equipment. There may be a little misunderstanding in relation to that. Where something is necessary and we have it, it will be provided. Many of those things are probably significant or lower-level. Clearly, what we need in schools is much less than in hospitals or for domiciliary care workers, for example.

Mr Baker: We follow the Public Health Agency advice on PPE, other equipment and social distancing in schools. The current advice is, as the Minister said, that PPE is not generally necessary. However, the Education Authority has been able to access some PPE supplies as a result of the work done by various agencies, including the Department of Finance's Central Procurement Directorate. Where a school, typically a special school, feels that it has a need because of the circumstances of an individual pupil, the Education Authority is engaging with that school to see what equipment is needed. The Public Health Agency advice is clear. We will continue to follow that advice as it evolves and as it is updated at local and national level.

Mr McCrossan: Derek, thank you, and I thank the Minister. Are special schools aware of that? The concern that we hear throughout my constituency and in others across Northern Ireland is that that message is not clear to special schools. Teachers are very concerned about vulnerable children in their care and the lack of PPE being provided to them in order to ensure the safety of those children. It is almost assumed that the advice that was shared last week is the blanket approach by the Department, which is, simply, the belief that there is no need for PPE in schools. I do not think that that is entirely relevant, because there is an absolute need for the equipment in special schools. You touched on it, Derek, and I was glad to hear that, but there needs to be communication with special schools, telling them, "Yes, where there is a concern for vulnerable children, we will provide the necessary PPE on a case-by-case basis".

Mr Baker: I will take that away as an action point to ensure that there is that degree of engagement and communication.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Could I supplement that briefly, Daniel? I have asked a number of times whether the strategic leadership group for special schools — the special school principals' group — has been added to the COVID-19 working group for the Department of Education. Have the Minister and the permanent secretary met the strategic leadership group? Is that not a way for you to deliver this type of communication efficiently?

Mr Baker: No, I would say not, Chair. It is better for the Education Authority to engage directly with that group and with the principals of special schools because the Education Authority is a direct drive with special schools. I am happy to engage through the Education Authority to make sure that those messages are communicated to special schools. We are trying to organise a meeting of the wider education family — a very large number of organisations — for this Friday, but it is difficult. I will take up that point at the meeting. I do not think that the special schools leadership group is a member of that wider family — we are talking more about the arm's-length bodies and the statutory agencies — but that is not to say that we are not constantly talking to special schools and special school principals. I will pick up that point about PPE.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, do you have any further questions?

Mr McCrossan: Yes, just two more, Chair. With children in special schools, every case is different. No two situations are the same, and everyone's circumstances are unique. It may be of benefit, particularly to the children but also to the school and the Department, to carry out an individual assessment of all statemented pupils to work out what their needs are and to ensure that their needs are met and that the necessary steps are taken to ensure their safety.

Mr Weir: Daniel, working with the EA, we are trying to provide as much support as we can to any vulnerable group, particularly special needs children. Realistically, there are certain practical difficulties with doing an assessment of every child with special needs, particularly given the time frame. We have to concentrate on doing things where we can.

Mr Baker: Daniel, I will just pick up on that. First, it must be recognised that a very small number of children are currently in special schools. Therefore, much of the effort from special schools, in conjunction with health and social services, is reaching out remotely to the families. That is very difficult. Nobody pretends that it is easy, and it is far from perfect, but a lot of effort is going into that. I think that we have communicated with the Committee on some of those efforts. You are right: a risk assessment will be done on each and every one of that small number of pupils, but that is best done by the special schools. The Department cannot do that. There are 17,000 statemented children, and 6,000 children normally attend special schools. The Department does not have the capacity to do a risk assessment of each and every child, but that is being done at a local level, and, hopefully, provision is being made at a local level. All that we can do is to keep engaging with and supporting special schools.

Mr Weir: People also need to bear it in mind that, while there is quite a large overlap and quite a large intersection of the Venn diagram, it is particularly about the medical needs and medical vulnerability. Medical vulnerability is not the same as special needs education; indeed, a child in a special needs school may have nothing that would make them in any way more medically vulnerable or any more risky to themselves or to others, and there will be others in mainstream schools who are quite medically vulnerable because of a condition but may not have any special educational needs. To some extent, there is always a slight degree of mismatch on this.

Mr McCrossan: I appreciate the detailed answers that you have both given. I was focusing specifically on the children of key workers who are vulnerable, are in school and will need that support.

Mr Weir: Daniel, a relatively small number of children of key workers who are vulnerable because of particular medical needs still need to be in school or need to be facilitated. Where that happens, those cases will always be looked at. Maybe there was a miscommunication: we were talking about the wider special education family.

Mr McCrossan: I appreciate that. That is all on that topic, but I want to touch on substitute teachers' pay.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, before you leave special schools, I want to ask the Minister and the permanent secretary how many special schools there are in Northern Ireland and how many are open and how many closed.

Mr Baker: There are 39 special schools in Northern Ireland. I do not have the detail on how many are open and closed today, but I can get that easily. Details of all the schools that are open are published on our website.

Mr Weir: I just want to touch on the wider picture. Work is ongoing to see whether, where there might be reluctance to have a particular school open, any arrangements can be made for clustering. There is a balance to be struck.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have you engaged with the health and social care trusts to assure yourself that the health needs that are normally met by special schools are being met in the home, if, indeed, a large number of special schools are closed?

Mr Weir: In the interests of succinctness, the answer is "Yes".

Mr Baker: We are working hard with the Department of Health to ensure that the trust reach out to children who normally attend a special school and have health-related needs so that they continue to meet those needs, albeit remotely. That is work in progress, Chair, and it will continue. It is not something that you do once. We just have to keep working at it, and we keep trying to improve the management information — I do not like to use the term "management information" — the numbers on that so that we can get that assurance, but the trusts have put those arrangements in place and are reaching out to children and families at home.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, further to last week, we asked for a response to that via correspondence. One other key thing that we asked for was an update on the delivery of measures, including but not limited to personal protective equipment, to assist special schools to open. In the response that the Department has given to the Committee today to the question on the provision of PPE to assist special schools to remain open, we have been referred to guidance on the Department of Education website on social distancing:

"Current NHS guidance is that where staff and children are not symptomatic, then no personal protective equipment is required above and beyond normal good hygiene practices. More stringent guidance applies to care workers, nurses & doctors who are providing patient care activities that bring them into close personal contact."

Do you not accept that the work in special schools brings teachers into close personal contact with pupils and that, therefore, a range of PPE has to be readily available to special schools if they are to safely conduct their work?

Mr Weir: Circumstances will vary from case to case and from school to school because, again, special needs and medical needs are not quite the same, and we got the detailed information, I think, subsequent to setting that out. A stockpile is being distributed by the Education Authority, so, yes, there is equipment available. Sometimes, that may not be where it is 100% required, but, if can be accommodated, we will try to do that as well. Again, we are following any PHA guidance and, indeed, any medical and health guidance on that.

Mr Baker: It would be useful, Chair, if we got the Committee details of the actual number of children attending special schools and included that in the data that we give to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is helpful, permanent secretary, but it does not reflect the number of special schools that are not open because they do not feel that they have the resources to be open. That is the key issue for me. I know that I have laboured the point of engaging directly with the strategic leadership group and with Belfast special schools. I am endeavouring to avoid reminding you of the difficulties that special schools and pupils with special educational needs have faced when relying on the Education Authority to act on their behalf in recent times.

I do not want to labour that. I will listen to my own advice on short questions, so I will leave that there and allow other members, if they want to, to return to that. I will bring Daniel back in for his final question.

Mr McCrossan: Chair, I was listening in there, and I got distracted. Minister, I and others have been communicating with the Department about sub teachers' pay. I wonder what is taking the Department of Education so long, given that Scotland already has the scheme in place. How long will it be before it is up and running? Quite a number of people are in contact with me. As the Minister will appreciate — I am sure other members are the same — everybody is concerned at the moment. I have quite a number of sub teachers in contact with me, so I just wonder how long it will take before it is up and running.

Mr Weir: In many ways, Daniel, it is out of our hands. To explain the situation, if this is to be done to the extent that, I think, we would all like it to be done, it would require direct finance beyond simply the education budget. We do not have a budget line that would be able to supply that. We require money out of the coronavirus overall budget block grant, if you want to call it that, and we cannot move on that unless and until we get money from that. We cannot pluck it out of existing commitments.

You mentioned Scotland. We are trying to tease out a little about that situation. I have heard slightly conflicting reports about precisely what is done in Scotland, but I think, on the timing, it was done only at the weekend, and I think that England and Wales are probably in a similar position to ours. There is a slightly different situation across the water with how they employ a lot of the sub teachers. They do not have a substitute list. Quite a lot of the work comes through employment agencies, which are in a slightly different position. There is no delay on our part. The fact is that we do not have the money, and we can pay the money only if we get this grant via the Department of Finance and the Executive. It is as straightforward as that.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you for that. Obviously, the quicker that can happen, the better it will be for many people.

Just to touch on a final point, Chair, if you will indulge me, about school sites, which I mentioned last week.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Just a final point.

Mr McCrossan: There are many school sites across Northern Ireland that are not being used but could be used for health purposes. I note today, Minister — I am not sure whether your Department or the EA decided this — that St Malachy's in Belfast has been released for use by medical staff. That is hugely welcome, because these sites could be utilised for the benefit of our health service and our medical staff. Last week, I mentioned to Derek that those sites could be used as testing centres, as we ramp up the level of testing, because there is a school in every major town or as close to that as possible. They would be very accessible. We also have big assembly halls in many larger schools — we have many — that could be used as, I suppose, wards for treating people with COVID-19 in the event that this thing spikes beyond recognition. Minister, first, can you enlighten us about St Malachy's? Secondly, has any consideration been given to schools, and have you been proactive in offering up the necessary and vital support of that valuable resource to the Department of Health for COVID-19?

Mr Weir: Daniel, we are always happy to respond to any requests about that. At the moment, one emergency hospital has been set up. Those are quite bespoke. I do not think that you can, essentially, go into a different building and do that, but, if there is a request from Health or anybody else for the use of facilities, we would always be happy to accommodate it. There are various things that are well placed to provide testing sites, and the Department of Health will pick and choose those. If they came to us and said, "We want such and such", we would be more than happy to give it to them. The permanent secretary can speak about that.

Mr Baker: Daniel, very quickly, the arrangement between St Malachy's and the Mater Hospital was a local arrangement. We are aware of it, but it was a bit of generosity on the part of St Malachy's. At a general level, a couple of weeks ago, we engaged with the Department of Health to identify what premises on the wider education estate could be made available if the Department of Health wanted it, and that offer remains. We identified some sites, but, as the Minister says, we will stand ready to respond to any requests. The Department of Health is not asking us for anything at present.

Mr Weir: To be fair across the wider piece, whatever responses are needed to the virus from a Health point of view, I do not think that a lack of premises is really the problem, to be perfectly honest.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks. I will bring William Humphrey in.

Mr Humphrey: I am happy if you want to take the remote questions first.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, no problem. Robbie, do you want to come in briefly?

Mr Butler: Yes, if you do not mind. First, I thank Peter, Derek and John for giving their time this morning. I thank the Minister, because, whilst we might disagree on some things sometimes, his availability and willingness to answer questions at short notice is commendable. I thank him for his leadership at this stage.

I will read out three questions, and I will not hog the meeting too much. If I read out the three questions, you can come back to them as you take them, if that is OK. They will touch on some of the issues that we have talked about. Just for some clarity, please, will parents of pupils who did not traditionally avail themselves of free school meals, perhaps because their kids went to school with a packed lunch, be eligible for the payment? Will the Minister consider continuing something like that, when we recover from COVID, for those who have not traditionally availed themselves of the free school meal service?

The second question is on the strategy for GCSE, AS and A-level exams. I know that there is only a little evidence of this, but, in the allocation of grades, will any provision be made for differences in learning styles, particularly in the longitudinal performances of girls and boys, through exams or continuous assessment?

The third question, Minister, is about Easter, which has become a time when a lot of parents start to prep pupils for the Association for Quality Education (AQE) assessment. Perhaps you could give us an update on what discussion has been had on AQE provision to give schools some clarity in that regard.

There is one more question, if that is OK, guys. I am looking at a graph on the number of schools that may be open at Easter. It seems that about a quarter of schools are showing a willingness to open at Easter, which seems slightly low. I understand why there may be reluctance, and I think that the Deputy Chair talked about that. With regard to Easter opening and potential summer opening, will the Minister outline whether any thought is being given to contractual obligations on teachers' pay and to any extra remuneration that teachers who will work at those times might qualify for?

Mr Weir: I will leave the free school meals bit to Derek. On the figures for the schools that have opted to remain open, there was an initial response in terms of schools' willingness, and that has burgeoned. The latest figure that we have is, I think, 387.

Mr Baker: Just over 400 were open yesterday, Robbie.

Mr Butler: OK, thank you.

Mr Weir: That means that close to 40% of schools were open.

In looking towards the summer, we will have to play it by ear a little bit on timing.

On AQE and the GL assessment of the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC), their intention — we have spoken to them — is to carry on with the normal timing. Those are scheduled for November, so it is a reasonable bit away. I think that there are contingency plans that they will be working on if that is not possible. As things stand, it is likely that those will go ahead. There would need to be a reassessment if we moved into some sort of second wave.

What was the other issue? GCSEs? A lot of intense work has been done, particularly by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and departmental officials, and work is also being finalised with the main stakeholders. We should be in a position to come to a conclusion on that very quickly. I hope to be able to say a little bit more, at least in broad terms, to the Assembly tomorrow. Unless a particular problem emerges towards the end of the sort of broader stakeholder engagement, we hope to be in a position to have all the details of that released to schools soon. That is nearing completion; we are not absolutely there yet, but it is close to completion.

Derek, do you want to pick up on the meals?

Mr Baker: Yes. If I understand the question correctly, the payments will be made to anybody who is eligible for free school meals and who has applied for it, even if their children do not generally avail themselves of free school meals and bring their own packed lunch. However, it will have to be someone who has gone through the process, applied and been deemed to be eligible.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that. I just want to go back, Minister, for a wee bit of clarification on two points. The main crux of my query on Easter opening was whether teachers who will be working over what is usually a holiday time will be given something like time off in lieu (TOIL) or extra remuneration. The other query is on exams. Some pupils, through the evidence of teacher assessments, will be able to say that they perform markedly better in exams than in continuous assessment. Is there surety that that will be encompassed when grades are awarded?

Mr Weir: All the issues on that will be dealt with. From the point of view of an exams process, the other thing that we have to ensure is that there is compatibility across the board so that our pupils are on a level playing field with those who are doing GCSEs in England and Wales and those who are doing A levels in Scotland. Obviously, that is the gateway to university and higher education etc. Examining precisely what happens with those will be part of the overall package, but that package will emerge.

Teachers are still getting paid, even over the Easter period. There is a good-sized cohort of teachers still in schools, but, by the same token, on any one day, perhaps 5% of the overall teaching profession is not in school, because there is rotation. We will look to see whether any particular consequences arise from that, but people are still getting full pay, which runs for 12 months of the year.

Mr Baker: Just to supplement that last point, Robbie, we are conscious that everybody needs a break. I expect that, although it is a matter for individual schools, the efforts that are being invested in remote teaching and learning will decrease during the Easter period as they would normally. It is in recognition of the fact that the teaching workforce and school leaders need support that we have put in place the volunteering arrangements. We hope to deploy those, and we are working hard at local level with the linked officers to see whether we can put in place the clustering of schools, which is, again, aimed at improving resilience.

I take your general point that, with a number of schools opening over the Easter period to support key workers and vulnerable children, staff are being asked to go above and beyond what they normally do. I will take that point away, and we will have to reflect on it.

Mr Butler: I really appreciate that. I have one final point to make, Derek. You mentioned volunteering. The graph that I am looking at is probably out of date, but it seems to me that, when asked about their willingness to accept the help of volunteers, the answer was mainly no. Most schools were not willing to accept volunteers to help. That was probably down to a risk assessment.

Mr Weir: To be fair, Robbie, there are probably two points there. Most schools do not need additional help. The idea of having volunteers is to have a pool of people who can be there if they are needed. However, the vast bulk of schools that are open are not under such severe pressure that they are completely short of staff. A relatively small number of staff are needed to be in. When it comes to pressure on individuals, I spoke to a school principal during the week who said that their policy was to ask people to come in once every seven days. That meant that people got a break in case there were any issues with self-isolation or whatever.

If schools feel that they can cope, their view will be that, if at all possible, they would prefer their own staff to be in because of the pupils' familiarity with them. The pool of volunteers is there to provide schools with the people to deal with all situations. We may come onto this, but, in a few locations, the

EA is undertaking ongoing work on additional school provision where there are black spots or gaps in the market. Those gaps are relatively rare, but teachers from a range of schools may be used there.

Mr Baker: I will just add another quick point on the numbers, Robbie. Of the schools that are open, the most common number of pupils attending is zero; that is the mode. The average number of pupils is two. I know that averages can be dangerous. The range is from zero to 19. There is one school with 19 pupils, and it goes down to one with 15, one with 14 and then down to about 10 pupils. The most common number of pupils in any school is zero, and, after that, it is one and two.

Mr Weir: Those numbers need to be put into a little bit of context. The overall figures will indicate how many are in on a particular day. Ultimately, however, more children are being facilitated. For a lot of parents, it is not a question of the child being at home five days a week or no days a week; in quite a lot of cases, key workers have said, for example, that they can accommodate the child being at home for three days a week but they need them to be in school on a Monday and Tuesday. Quite often, the individuals who are in school will vary quite a bit from day to day. The overall number of children being catered for is, ultimately, larger than the individual numbers in a school on any particular day.

Mr Butler: Much appreciated, thanks.

Mr Newton: I welcome the Minister, Derek and John. Thank you for joining us. I look forward to an update from you tomorrow, Minister, at the Ad Hoc Committee.

When you reach where I am on the list, a number of the questions have already been dealt with. Minister, the Committee met informally and formally with the leadership group of the special needs schools, and you will know of the huge empathy that the Committee felt with them. I am pleased to hear that PPE is now to become available. I urge that whatever channels of communication with special schools, Derek feels, are appropriate be kept open.

I want to ask about another group of vulnerable children: those who have been described as being in the at-risk category. They are children who benefit from attendance at school not just from an educational perspective but from the perspective of school being a haven away from a home in which they are regarded as being at risk. They benefit from attendance at breakfast club and from school meals being available. We know where we are with those at the minute. Schools and social services work extremely well together, in my experience, on children at risk. Are any efforts being made alongside social services to encourage attendance at school for at-risk children?

Mr Weir: Good work is going on with social services on that. On the food issues, there has been communication with the Department for Communities. When it is looking more broadly at providing hot meals for vulnerable families, the Department is clearly mindful of the fact that a payment going in may not be enough of a guarantee that the children are getting them. There has to be close liaison with social services on that as well.

A related issue is writing out to schools to encourage principals, without adding to their burden — I know that some principals are already doing it — to use their knowledge to reach out to pupils who, they detect, may not necessarily fit into one of the groups and may not be on the register. One of the worries is that there are pupils who are not on official lists but there will be local knowledge and a need for additional support, so we are trying to liaise with principals on that.

Mr Baker: I accept your point entirely, Robin: keeping in touch with vulnerable children is an issue of major concern to us. We do not want children who are in or are on the cusp of the at-risk group to fall through the cracks. I mentioned that the last time that I spoke to the Committee. We have been working on that, but it is still only a work in progress. We will continue working with the Department of Health not just on the health issues but on the social services side. We are working up more detailed plans with the Department of Health for how we reach out to and provide a safety net for all those children.

It is tough work because of the whole social distancing issue and the loss of that physical contact, but it is most definitely on our agenda. Interestingly, from looking at papers coming out of Whitehall, I see that it is on the national agenda as well. It is on the agenda of our colleagues in the Department of Justice, not just those in Health and Communities. We will continue to work on the issue and hopefully bring further progress reports to the Committee.

Mr Newton: That would be very helpful. The other area of concern, Derek, is the — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Humphrey: I think Robin is playing the banjo.

Mr Butler: The ukulele.

Mr Newton: Hello? I am still here. Sorry, but I am getting a lot of interference. The PSNI —.

Mr Weir: Do you want me to speak to social services for you? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead, Robin.

Mr Newton: The PSNI is reporting a huge increase in domestic violence. Not every home in which domestic violence occurs will have children in it, but is there any liaison with the PSNI around children and the potential for making use of school attendance?

Mr Baker: The current arrangements in place for children at risk and who are known to us because of their domestic circumstances still apply. The outreach services are in place. In the context of the point that you have just raised, I mentioned that we were trying to develop more comprehensive plans with our partners in Health and, indeed, Justice to pick up those issues so that those children maintain contact with the system and are not abandoned in some way.

Children already at risk are already on the register. Those services continue to operate as normal. However, it is really children who are on the cusp of falling into risk whom we worry about. We will lose that day-to-day contact with them, so that is an area in which we need to invest a bit of effort.

Mr Newton: The fact that a child is not at school means that the schoolteacher is unable to report where he or she may have concerns about that child's welfare.

Mr Baker: That is absolutely right.

Mr Newton: I look forward to hearing whatever report comes forward on that. Thank you.

Ms C Kelly: Good morning. Thank you for meeting us today. As Karen mentioned, I will focus mainly on childcare.

The crisis has highlighted how vital our childcare sector is for early education, to the economy and in ensuring that parents can access work. Unfortunately, as you are probably aware, owing to a lack of financial support or guidance, many providers have closed their doors. That has resulted in many key workers not yet having access to the approved childcare scheme. Many key-worker parents are unable to find childcare because their children are too young to attend school or because the length of the school day is shorter than their shift at work.

The feeling among many providers that I have spoken to over the last number of weeks is that childcare has not been sufficiently recognised by the relevant Departments. We risk the collapse of this vital sector, if interventions are not made immediately. Providers are crying out to play their part in the crisis and assist in the care of our key workers' children. Childcare providers deliver an essential and highly valued service all year round, and they should be the solution for many at this crucial time. We need to ensure that the sector does not fall between two stools. It is the backbone of our society when it comes to early education and care for our youngest citizens.

Minister, you mentioned a support package for childcare: can you give us a timeline for when it will be available to the sector? Can you share any of the detail agreed for the support package?

Mr Weir: No, I cannot. It will be part of a range of proposals that will be in front of the Executive, so I cannot do that. All that I can say directly is that I do not disagree with any of what you said about the importance of the childcare sector.

The Department of Health also has a role to play in providing childminding services. A joint proposal that was drafted a while ago has gone to the Department of Finance and awaits funding approval. I hope that that can move ahead fairly quickly, but I obviously cannot give details, given the Executive processes. It has been clearly in our mind over the past week or two, however. Proposals are teed up and ready to go. Even if those were able to be announced quickly, it would still take a little time to put them in place. When the green light is given for the finance, the aim is to move as quickly as possible.

You will appreciate that it is a matter that will be discussed by the Executive, so I cannot really go into detail directly at this stage.

Mr Baker: Catherine, apologies for being a bit coy on the issue. As the Minister said, the proposals are with the Executive and will be considered shortly. Department of Health and Department of Education officials, in liaison with the sector, are looking at three broad areas to ensure that, first, key workers, on whom we depend, can go to work with the confidence that their children are being cared for and, secondly, that schools and childcare providers can operate safely and have the necessary resources in place to do so. I take your point that we need to have a sector that can respond to the needs of children and families when we come out the other end of the crisis. Without going into the detail of what the Executive will consider, those three broad areas are on the agenda.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you. I am glad to hear that.

I have one more question. Can we get some clarity on whether the Education Authority board continues to meet during this period? How often is it meeting?

Mr Weir: I do not know the frequency, but the membership of the board was due for renewal. The various sectors and arm's-length bodies that provide members have all, as far as I know, nominated to it, so the board continues to exist and function. I do not know the frequency of its meetings, however.

Mr Baker: I assume that it is meeting normally, albeit remotely. I will come back to you on that point. It is a point of detail that I can check easily and come back to the Committee on.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you. That is me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Catherine.

Minister and permanent secretary, I just want to supplement Catherine's question briefly. She has articulated the importance of childcare superbly. The Department of Education and the Department of Health have made a joint bid to the Department of Finance for a budget to fund a financial assistance package for childcare. We are in week three of lockdown, so "as soon as possible" is no longer adequate when it comes to getting assistance for childcare. When do you expect to hear back from the Minister of Finance on the joint bid? Surely the matter is on the Executive's meeting schedule for this week.

Mr Weir: I expect decisions to be taken soon. I will not disagree with anything that you said there. It would probably be a breach of protocol if I were even to discuss what items are on the agenda ahead of the Executive meeting, but I hope that we will be able to resolve this very soon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you expect to be able to announce a financial assistance package for childcare this week?

Mr Weir: I am just saying that I suspect that it will be very soon. Once there is agreement on the package, its elements will be delineated. Part of it will be to support the sustainability of the sector. The package will have a dual purpose: it will support the childcare sector and ensure, as Catherine and others have said, that there are places available, particularly for key workers. To be fair, part of the *[Inaudible]* is that schools will be continuing payment and are clearly part of the public sector. They are in a different situation. Having schools open does not incur additional cost. Many childcare providers are either in the voluntary and community sector or in the private sector. Given some of the constraints of social distancing, even if there was a desire from every parent and a willingness to have every child in, it would not be possible. It would not be economically viable for private childcare providers to be open for a fraction of their current cadre. It is mixture of those factors. I hope that there will be movement on that soon. I cannot tell you more without breaching Executive confidentiality.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The challenge is twofold, as you say. It is about key workers being able to access childcare provision, which, I understand, has been a massive challenge, and about the sustainability of the childcare sector, which, childcare providers tell me, is at risk. The urgency of the matter cannot be overstated.

Mr Weir: I am very much aware of that, and I hope to see movement soon. Derek spoke about the provision of places. Where it is possible for a school to open and teachers sit and wait for the children

of key workers to come in but none show up, no harm has been done, apart from it being a waste of time. It is not financially viable for a childcare provider who would, in different circumstances, have maybe 60, 70 or 80 children in to make available their facilities and have none or, maybe, have full staff costs for two children coming in. That is why they are in a different situation from schools and why it has been problematic. I hope there will be developments on this soon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is why, I understand, an aspect of the package is to propose approved home childcarer arrangements that will address some of those issues. Our neighbour in Ireland has funded the closure of childcare provision. That is the scale of investment that they have made in their childcare sector. Minister, I appreciate that you have said that you realise the urgency of that issue, so I will pause there and bring in Maurice Bradley.

Mr Weir: If, on a good-neighbourly basis, any neighbour wants to provide us with additional finance to help our childcare sector, we will be happy to receive it.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks to the Minister, Derek and John for attending this morning. I have a list of questions, but I have scored most of them out, as they have been answered. However, I am keen to find out from the Minister how soon information will be available on the appeals following assessment grading. What form will that take? I will ask a few questions. There is concern in pockets of East Londonderry about the lack of schools that will be open over the Easter period and the lack of information on which schools will be available over Easter. Will the Minister throw some light on that? Is the decline in the number of schools that are open a direct response to the pupil numbers? I am sorry for asking all of that at the one time.

Mr Weir: There were instances in which schools — even post-primary schools — were open initially but nobody showed up. That has been a driver for some schools to say that there is not a great deal of need for them to be open; that is fair enough. The overall number of schools has slightly fluctuated. It may be lower than the initial figure, but more schools were open yesterday than were open on Monday, for instance. We are seeing some schools that were not open initially now opening. I think that the numbers have dipped below 400 only once over the entire period, so there has not been a rapid decline.

I note that there has been a particular problem around Coleraine, for instance. We are working with the EA on a fallback. If we cannot get a local cluster agreed between the schools that are open, they will look at creating what they call an "emergency EA school". That will be the EA, along with sub teachers, opening up a couple of schools in an area and absorbing the pressure. There are maybe two or three parts of Northern Ireland where that is the case, and I think work is ongoing on that.

On the GCSE side of things, I cannot say anything more directly at this stage. We are close to a decision on it, so I cannot go into the detail ahead of that.

Mr M Bradley: That is great. What about the appeal process?

Mr Weir: The appeals process is part of it. Do you mean from a grading point of view?

Mr M Bradley: How are you going to accept an appeal if it is a grading situation as opposed to an exam situation?

Mr Weir: How anybody challenges or appeals a grade will be part of the overall package. I do not want to do this piecemeal and say, "Here are the arrangements for this summer, but we do not know what is going to happen" or "We cannot say what will happen in the summer". It will be part of the overall package.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you know when you will be able to answer in relation to the appeal and the examination?

Mr Weir: I hope to say more on that tomorrow. Broadly speaking, there has been a lot of detailed work. With regard to discussion with key stakeholders, while there have been small issues of detail, as yet, nobody has raised any issues of principle on what is proposed. The last of those sessions is happening today, and, unless something major comes up today, we hope to start processing that. I hope to be able to say something tomorrow. After that, there may be a little finessing of the detail

before Justin Edwards writes out directly to the schools on behalf of CCEA. That may be a few days hence, but those are the timescales that we are talking about.

Mr McNulty: Thank you Minister, Derek and John for joining us this morning. You have a hectic schedule, so I appreciate your time. I will rattle through my questions, and then you can come back to me, if that is OK. I will start off with a positive point. Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry is closed to pupils, but its technology department has been opened, and the teachers are fabricating PPE, which is being distributed to the health trust very effectively. I applaud them for that work, for that ingenuity and that source of production of PPE.

Minister, you keep referring to schools being closed. It is important that the distinction is made now that schools are open, supporting children's learning remotely through online learning and physical learning packs. Are you happy that teachers and principals are being supported strongly enough in that assignment?

Secondly, has a risk assessment been completed for teachers who are childminding pupils and for volunteers who may come into schools through a volunteering scheme, who will often be older, retired teachers who may be in the at-risk category?

Substitute teachers have been discussed, but I want confirmation that you have sought funding from the Finance Minister. Has that funding been delayed, or has it not been forthcoming for teachers who are on the casual subbing register?

If this continues, can schools be depended on to be open during the summer holidays? I know that you said that teachers were being paid anyway, but teachers have scheduled holidays. They are not being paid to work during their holidays, so I want clarification on that.

In relation to evidence previously presented to the Committee on children with special educational needs, can you give us an update on what impact COVID-19 has had on the reform of that service? Do you have any idea of the staff absentee rate in the Education Authority? How is that impacting on supporting vulnerable children?

There has also been a historical issue around the recognition of qualifications for Northern results. Can I have an assurance that no child in the North will be disadvantaged by the system of allocating grades?

I will finish with continuity of learning, if you do not mind. Focus has been on continuity for those in years 7, 12, 13 and 14. Will major emphasis be put on continuity of learning for all years?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Give him a chance. Minister?

Mr McNulty: I have just two more points. What feedback have you had from teachers on how the "new normal" for education is working? Is there a mechanism for parents and teachers to provide feedback on how the new normal is working and how it meets their children's educational needs? I want to put major emphasis on the point that Robin mentioned — I mentioned it to you last week, Derek — and that is the safety of children at home. I am placing myself in the position of a child who is in a threatening environment in his own home and whose only escape was to get to school every day. I am putting myself in that child's shoes and thinking that the Minister or the permanent secretary has said that there is work in progress to put a plan in place. That fills me with fear. It fills with me all of the wrong emotions for a child in that position. I just hope that more energy is being put into the work in progress to work with the statutory agencies, Childline and Barnardo's to ensure that there is no child at home now who is feeling fearful. I stress that that issue needs to be addressed more urgently.

Lastly, there has to be major praise given to teachers and principals, who have had to completely reconstitute their role. They have become childminders or online teachers. I also want to applaud the kids who have had their normal completely disrupted and are adjusting to their new normal. There has to be so much praise and appreciation for teachers, principals and pupils for this new normal and how they have had to adapt and reconstitute.

Minister, can help me address all those issues in turn, if you can? Thank you.

Mr Weir: Justin, I am maybe showing my age a bit, but I am reminded of the contestants at the end of 'The Generation Game', where a large conveyor belt of prizes went past and they were asked to remember them all at the end of it. I will try my best to address the points.

Mr McNulty: I do not like that analogy at all, Minister. I do not like that analogy at all. These are points I feel strongly about, and it is not about *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Weir: I am making the point, Justin, with respect, I probably counted about 11 questions in that, and it is difficult to remember all of those. I am just saying, "Do try and jump — *[Interruption.]* Try and jump in as much as is possible". Derek may remember something that I leave out.

I certainly echo any praise of schools, teachers and non-teaching staff who are delivering in very difficult circumstances. In many cases, this is actually a form of remotely supervised learning. I will not categorise it simply as "childminding", but certainly they deserve all the praise.

On qualifications, CCEA has worked closely with our counterparts not just in the United Kingdom but in the Republic of Ireland. We face a global situation, and there is, if you like, that ongoing work to ensure that there is recognition of qualifications across the board. We do not envisage there being a problem with that.

Mr Baker: Can I jump in, Justin? I echo the Minister's comment on support for distance learning. The whole school system, the estate and the operational model have been transformed. We are trying to provide support for schools that need it for distance learning. For example, I think that I mentioned last week that the inspectorate is out there supporting teachers and school leaders, where they need it, in preparing resource materials, giving them access to resource materials and disseminating good practice. We now have a linked officer for every school to provide support in this and anything else that they are doing. I have to say, as you have already noted — you mentioned Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry — schools are way ahead of the game here. There is tremendous innovation and imagination going on. The Minister frequently gets reports from schools about good practice that is happening. Therefore, I am very confident in what schools are doing by way of distance learning. It is a success story.

Mr Weir: On just a few of the other points, Justin, you made a very valid point about vulnerable children at home, and that is why we are working closely with social services, Health and the PSNI etc. Whenever we refer to a "work in progress", probably what we are trying to convey is that it is not about "Here's the solution. It has now happened. We can forget about it". The fact is that it is a continuing process.

Reform was mentioned specifically. I think that, from a practical point of view, a lot of reform initiatives, particularly on the transformation side, have had to be put on hold, particularly given that, I suppose, resources and staffing have been redirected towards the crisis. The summer has been mentioned, and obviously, as we move closer to the summer, there will be a re-evaluation. There are no plans at present in relation to that. However, part of the purpose *[Inaudible]* — for instance, with regard to the two calls that have been made for volunteers — is to have a large group of people who can be called on if we find particular levels of stress in the teaching workforce. It may well be that some geographical areas will have plenty of people and be able to cope, no problem, but other areas may be short, so a range of options are there if this needs to go on for longer.

You also made a valid point about teaching continuing on that basis. We have referred to "open" and "closed", sometimes on the basis of whether the place is physically open for children. However, ongoing education work did not stop at the end of March: it continues and will continue until the end of term.

I think I have covered maybe seven or eight of the points. Just mention anything else, briefly, I have not touched on yet.

Mr McNulty: Risk assessment.

Mr Weir: Where there is a particular issue for a child, things can be done. Anything that is done is done in line with PHA advice. Are we in a position to go into each school to do a risk assessment? I do not think that that is particularly practicable.

Mr Baker: That is for school leaders.

Mr Weir: It is for school leaders to do a level of assessment on that basis. It is not practical for the Department or anyone else to do that for 1,000-plus schools in Northern Ireland.

Any other issues?

Mr McNulty: You are waiting for funding from the Finance Minister for substitute teachers.

Mr Weir: Yes. We have put forward a proposal, as, indeed, to be fair, have other Departments. Within that, a range of proposals have been put forward across the board. As with the general budgetary process, what is being put forward by Departments will far outweigh what is currently available in financial terms to deal with COVID-19. As yet, there has been no positive response. I have indicated that, when it comes to getting a funding package, we are dependent on getting that external funding.

The only other broader point that I would make, whether it is to do with Education or any other Department, is that we have been in a moving situation. Even in the last number of weeks, the Chancellor in London has announced packages that have had consequences. Where we are today or even at the end of this week is not necessarily the end of the story with regard to finance. That will be an ongoing process. But, yes, we have put in a bid in relation to that.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister and the permanent secretary for giving us their valuable time this morning. I also thank the principals and teachers who are giving great leadership in the most difficult of circumstances across Northern Ireland. In particular, I put on record my thanks to Dr Paul McBride of St Malachy's College for the decision that he and his leadership team took to free up school facilities to support the medical workers who do such great work in the Mater Hospital. That is something that we all should commend and welcome. Also, the Minister will know — I spoke to him a few weeks ago — about the principal in north Belfast who phoned around and gathered up all the spare PPE that there was in the local schools and took it to the Mater Hospital directly. I thank them for doing that.

All the questions have been asked — in fact, some of them have been asked more than once this morning. I thank the Minister and Mr Baker for the time that they have taken and the work that they have put in over the last number of weeks. It is something that we should all thank them for, because they are working in the most difficult of situations. I also thank Robin Swann. It is easy for people to be critical, but it is important that the Ministers follow medical and scientific advice; they are the experts. We have lots of experts in Northern Ireland. We are coming down with them, particularly on social media. It is easy to be critical, but I thank our local Administration and the national Government for the financial packages that have been put in place across government to ease the burden on businesses, families, schools and so on. I take the opportunity to help them.

I have no particular questions, because they have all been asked, but, on a brighter note, I am sure that the Minister will join me in congratulating Hazelwood Integrated College in north Belfast, which is up for the Pearson award for making a difference in 2020, one of five secondary schools across the United Kingdom. I am sure that the Minister will join me in wishing Mrs Thompson, the principal, all the very best for her school and her leadership team. Hopefully, success will come back to our wee country. Thank you very much, Minister, for all that you do, and Derek.

Mr Weir: I certainly join in those congratulations. I have seen online that a couple of other schools are up for awards. I will probably get in trouble if I forget one. For instance, St Cecilia's in Londonderry is one, and there are other schools as well. I congratulate all of the schools that are up for awards, and I congratulate schools on their wider response. As I indicated in my initial remarks, it has gone beyond simply the educational provision but has joined the community in providing that wider community response.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In closing, Minister, I have had two questions raised with me on how vocational qualifications such as BTECs will be awarded.

Mr Baker: We are working with the Department for the Economy, which, in the same way as we commissioned CCEA to give us advice on how we would deal with GCSEs, A levels and other public examinations in schools, has commissioned CCEA regulation in respect of vocational qualifications. The same process will be followed there. That might be one for the Economy Minister to announce, rather than the Education Minister, but parallel work is going on.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Obviously, there are some vocational qualifications sat in our schools.

Mr Baker: Yes, there are. We are covering those off, Chair. We are not ignoring those. Also, of course, there are A levels and GCSEs undertaken in schools that are awarded by English awarding bodies. Some announcements have already been made in respect of those, and we are making arrangements so that the schools and the pupils know what is going on there.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): One specific concern raised with me was the understanding that, in a particular aspect of a subject in the Republic of Ireland, the approach of the awarding body there is to award everyone a 100% mark. Has that been reported to you? That would obviously raise questions around level playing fields.

Mr Weir: To be fair, it has not been brought to my attention.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will raise it in detail with you.

Mr Weir: If you want to email us the details, we can raise that specifically with CCEA. I have to say, I wish I had gone to that school, to be honest.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Finally, did CCEA scope rescheduling examinations to the summer? If so, why was that approach not adopted in favour of predicted grades?

Mr McCrossan: Chair, can I come in after you are done?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes.

Mr Weir: Early on, going back over a month, there were potential options. That was one of the things that were discussed briefly. The problem is that you would need quite a lot of lead-in time. I think that there was also a feeling from CCEA, which I shared, that the worst possible situation would be, if you like, hanging on until the last minute, then announcing a postponement, and then the postponement not being able to be taken into account as well. It was felt that that was not a viable route to be scoped. If, for the sake of argument, there was a situation where, in a parallel universe, you were able to postpone something from June until December, that would be a slightly different kettle of fish, but the feeling was that simply pushing back by a month or two would not give any level of certainty. I also think that, as part of that, there was ongoing coordination and discussion, particularly with other UK qualifiers. There would not have been a great deal of point in CCEA something that, for instance, the other examining boards did not do. It has to be compatible with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual). In particular, there has to be a level of compatibility on the A level side so that, when universities are looking at something, although it may not be identical, they can have a broad comparison between boards.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Daniel, is it in relation to examinations?

Mr McCrossan: It is, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Very briefly.

Mr McCrossan: It is in relation to a point that I raised with Derek last week and that, he said, he would go and look at. Will young people's qualifications be recognised as valid if they seek to access universities in the EU and further afield? You were to get some confirmation on that, Derek. It is just that there is a bit of concern out there in relation to that.

Mr Baker: Daniel, the answer is yes. I think that we have written to the Committee on that; it may have gone out only yesterday evening. We are determined that any qualifications awarded this year, by whatever means, will be accepted universally on the same basis as qualifications offered any year, so that this cohort in no way be disadvantaged. I think that we wrote or are about to write to the Committee on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is available at page 31, permanent secretary.

Mr Baker: Right. I have not seen that. Yes, I think that Peter Burns, our departmental Assembly liaison officer, wrote to the Committee Clerk on that point yesterday.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We will follow that up. Minister, just in —.

Mr McCrossan: Just a final point —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Very briefly, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: I have a final point on free school meals; it is an important one. Given that many individual circumstances have changed as a result of significant job losses and other employment matters, the eligibility for free school meals of various children will surely change.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The permanent secretary has advised that anyone who has become eligible recently will be able to apply to and avail themselves of that scheme. Is that fair enough, permanent secretary?

Mr Baker: Correct.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks. We have run over our time with the Minister and the permanent secretary. We are extremely grateful for that and for —.

Mr Weir: I will have to leave at this stage. The dial-in with the Executive is due at 12.00 noon, so I need to get things set up for that.

Mr Baker: I am still here, Chair.

Mr Weir: Derek is here all week.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, I have one final, final question, very briefly.

Mr Weir: OK.

Mr Lyttle: We have recognised the courage of our teaching staff. Will we be able to settle the teachers' fair pay and conditions award in the new Budget?

Mr Weir: Work on that is in progress today. I give them a commitment in terms of the level of funding that is there. Hopefully, things are moving in a positive direction on that side as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We wish you well in your dealings with the Executive to secure that funding to support our teaching and non-teaching staff, Minister. Thank you.

Derek, are you still there?

Mr Baker: I am still here, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Derek, I extend our thanks to the Minister to you and your staff. We thank you for your commitment to have regular engagement with the Committee in these important times.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Chair. I am more than happy to continue that. There are a couple of specific action points that I need to take away from today, and I have taken a note of those. I hope that there are no more, because my pen has just run out of ink. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: That was just on Justin's questions. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Baker: I am not in my office. I will ask you a question, and maybe the Clerk can come back in due course. We gave you a written update, and I know that the Committee got it very late yesterday. Would you like us to send that to you every week and highlight any changes or updates from the previous version, so that you do not have to read it all again?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes.

Mr Butler: Agreed.

Mr Baker: OK. We will organise that with the Committee Clerk.

Chair, I am just reflecting on some of your opening questions. I will commit that, before we meet again — I hope that I am not overcommitting — that I or somebody in the Department will meet the strategic leadership group of special schools. I note your passion on that point; it is well made and well taken. I will commit to engaging with that group. That is an important action point for me.

Mr Newton: An excellent piece of news.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Permanent secretary, thank you very much.

Mr Baker: Thank you. Is that us finished?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is us. Thank you.

Mr Baker: Thank you.