



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19  
Response

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Education

9 April 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

### Ministerial Statement: Education

9 April 2020

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Andy Allen

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Paula Bradley

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Jonathan Buckley

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Mark Durkan

Ms Sinéad Ennis

Mr Paul Givan

Mr William Humphrey

Ms Catherine Kelly

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Justin McNulty

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Peter Weir

Miss Rachel Woods

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** The Speaker received notification on 7 April that the Minister of Education wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your pack. I welcome the Minister of Education and invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee on the work that has been undertaken and is under way in the education sector in response to the COVID-19 situation.

I am grateful to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their vital contribution at this very difficult time. The issues that we are facing have never been encountered before, and all areas of society are facing difficult challenges. As ever, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff must be our priority. Our teachers and school leaders are doing an excellent job in supporting our children and young people and providing remote learning to maintain a daily routine.

In particular, I want to thank those schools that are open today for key workers' children and vulnerable children and those that intend to open over Easter and in the weeks ahead. In these extraordinary times, it is heartening that our principals and staff are showing such leadership and compassion for vulnerable pupils and those whose parents are key to the COVID-19 response.

I am sure that members will join me to pay tribute to teaching and non-teaching staff, their trade union representatives and the increasing number of volunteers who are now coming forward, be they school governors, retired teachers, retired classroom assistants or colleagues from the wider education sector. I am deeply grateful to those people for the wholeheartedly constructive and cooperative manner in which they have lent their support to the wider effort to respond to the enormous challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Before going into detail on the Department's response to COVID-19, I can highlight that a formal offer on teachers' pay and workload was made yesterday to the five main teaching unions. I am pleased that there has been progress on the issue of teachers' pay and workload. Since returning to the Executive in January, I have made the resolution of this long-running industrial dispute a priority. Indeed, this is one of the main commitments in New Decade, New Approach. I am grateful to Executive colleagues for their overall decisions on the Budget allocation to the Department of Education. They have allowed me to ensure that appropriate financial provision for a pay award has been included in my decisions on the allocations within the Department of Education's 2020-21 budget.

The five trade unions that make up the Northern Ireland Teaching Council will now consult with their members on the proposals in advance of any formal acceptance. I urge all teachers to consider the formal offer, which, if accepted, will bring an end to the industrial action that has been ongoing since January 2017 and has been having a debilitating effect on the sector.

Turning to the COVID-19 situation, the Department's COVID-19 strategy and plan supports the overall Executive strategy. Our plan is built around the following strategic priorities: first, to ensure the continuity of learning for children and young people; secondly, to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers; and, thirdly, to ensure that families do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing. Our central planning assumption is that schools and non-statutory preschool education settings will remain open to accommodate remote learning and to ensure that there is provision for vulnerable children and for key workers' children up to the end of year 10. The vast majority of children should not attend school.

The Department will follow the Public Health Agency's advice at all times and will make use of the COVID-19 legislation and regulation-making powers only where necessary. My Department has put in place emergency response arrangements and is working closely with all its educational partners on a range of very complex issues that have arisen from the coronavirus outbreak. These include the Education Authority (EA) on service delivery issues, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and, on a daily basis, the teacher's unions.

Schools are regularly updated with appropriate advice as the situation evolves. These arrangements support the wider Executive response to COVID-19. In the Department, we have focused our work on six priority areas. These are: pay for the teaching and non-teaching workforce; free school meals; support for vulnerable children; distance learning; examinations; and support for key workers. In all those areas, we are attempting to address problems that we have never encountered before. We have been putting in place measures that we have never had to implement before, certainly not on this scale, and we are having to do this at great speed, with no opportunities to properly consult or test. It is really a question of deliver quickly, assess impact on the ground and refine as we go. Of course, all this is being done with a workforce that has been impacted at an organisational level and at a personal level, like everyone else in society, by the issues that this terrible crisis has visited upon us. The officials have risen magnificently to the challenge.

On pay for the teaching and non-teaching workforce, I can confirm that education sector employees will continue to receive normal pay during the COVID-19 crisis. Normal pay will apply regardless of whether people have been quarantined or medically advised to self-isolate, or are unable to work due to caring responsibilities or unable to attend their workplace due to closure. The same arrangements will apply to substitute teachers and non-teaching staff who are providing emergency cover. All current bookings through the Northern Ireland substitute teacher register will be honoured. Absences will not count towards the normal triggers for absence management or contractual sick pay and will not constitute a break in service for pensions or other purposes. We are putting in place contingency arrangements to ensure that payrolls will be processed and payments made.

I recognise that some workers in education, such as the substitute teaching workforce who would normally provide day-to-day cover, will no longer have access to secure work. Proposals have been developed for a hardship fund for those substitute teachers who were providing day-to-day cover in recent months but whose regular work has now ended as a result of COVID-19. A separate bid for this has been made to the Department of Finance and this will be dependent on additional funding.

To address concerns about the impact that school closures will have on children who are eligible for free school meals, a new direct payment scheme has been introduced for those families. From 23 March, eligible families have received fortnightly payments of £2.70 per child per day for each day of term that the schools are closed. To avoid further hardship, the payment will continue over the 10 schools days of the Easter period. To date, over 51,000 direct payments have been made for 93,000 children, and, by 15 April, over 96,000 children's families will have received payments.

We are aware of a number of children who have not received direct payments because no bank account details have been made available to the Education Authority. The EA is working hard to obtain the bank details, and I urge everyone whose children receive free school meals to get their bank details to the EA as soon as possible. We also know there are a number of children whose families have no bank accounts at all, including 360 children of asylum seekers. We are working with the Home Office to resolve that issue urgently.

The Department for Communities has announced a number of additional measures to support the provision of food and assistance to vulnerable groups, and my officials are working closely with that Department to ensure that food is available to those families. As part of the voluntary and community sector response programme, which is coordinated by DFC and was agreed by the Executive, the Youth Service will work with the councils to assist in the provision of food for vulnerable young people. The funding for that was agreed yesterday by the Executive and announced by the Finance Minister earlier today.

The Youth Online website allows young people to register a food need. Going forward, its role is expected to involve the provision of food for over 3,000 vulnerable young people who remain at risk despite the free school meal direct payments. I am grateful for the proactivity that the Youth Service has demonstrated in response to COVID-19 to date. I know that it will have a vital contribution to make, working alongside other partners at local level.

In line with the rest of UK, I am prioritising support for vulnerable children and their parents and carers. I appreciate that school is a protective factor for many vulnerable children. For some, it offers the only stability in their lives. Vulnerable children should therefore be facilitated to attend school where it is in their best interests and safe and appropriate to do so. Schools, parents and carers — and social services, where children have a social worker — should work closely together to determine the safest option for each child. The Education Authority has a range of services in place to provide support for vulnerable children and their parents. My Department continues to engage with colleagues in the health and social care sector to ensure a continuum of support for families, including those children who are on, or on the cusp of, the child protection register, as particular pressures could materialise if they are at home for significant periods. We are also developing further guidance to support vulnerable children, including those who attend special schools. I anticipate that this will be published shortly.

The EA and the health authorities have given assurances that provisions are in place to meet the educational and care needs of children who attend special schools. Where school buildings are closed to pupils, a range of creative approaches is in use, with online learning platforms being used to maintain contact and engage directly with children. Protocols remain in place between schools and Health and Social Care, keeping all the needs of children at the forefront of decision-making. As our children and young people have more free time, it is only natural that they will spend more time online. We want to make sure that teachers, parents and carers have all the knowledge and advice that they need to keep children safe online. I will announce further measures to help them in the coming days.

The Department has published guidance on its website in relation to social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) in education settings. Current NHS guidance is that, where staff and children are not symptomatic, no PPE is required over and above normal good hygiene practices. Further guidance is being developed in Great Britain on the use of PPE in education settings, including in relation to children and young people with complex needs. The equivalent Northern Ireland guidance will be published once it has been cleared by the Public Health Agency.

That said, the EA has received a supply of PPE and cleaning materials, which is available to all schools, including special schools, on request. On a number of occasions, there has been delivery of that equipment. It should be noted that, in the main, parents of children who attend special schools have decided to keep their children at home. Where key workers or parents of vulnerable children who normally attend a special school, or indeed any school, wish to send their children to school, they should, in the first instance, discuss this with the school, which will determine whether it can accommodate the request.

In the current context, distance learning is clearly vital to support continuity of learning and provide a sense of purpose and daily routine for our children and young people. My Department, together with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Education Authority, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), is focused on ensuring that appropriate action is being taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning, progression and well-being of our children and young people. Our delivery partners have identified designated link officers who are the first point of contact for schools. These officers are working with schools — every school has a point of contact — to provide pastoral and practical support to ensure that individual issues are resolved promptly and to identify what more can be done to support continuity of learning. Expertise in the EA, CCEA and ETI is being used to ensure that curriculum resources are available when and where needed. There have been additional offers of help from outside those bodies.

Schools have been proactive in supporting home learning, and teachers have devised booklets to guide parents on how to use learning platforms. Substantial capacity and provision exists within the Education Network service to support learning and teaching outside the classroom. We are also seeing some very positive statistics. On Friday 3 April, almost 45,000 individual students and teachers accessed the EA Education Network portal from home. In excess of 80,000 visits to the EA Education Network portal were made from homes over a 24-hour period and over 720,000 emails were sent and received by students and teachers within that 24-hour period.

Turning now to qualifications and examinations, I recognise that exams are a key concern for children and parents. In the absence of exams this summer, my priority is to ensure that pupils can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, be it starting university, further education, sixth form or an apprenticeship or employment. It is crucial that no one is disadvantaged. My officials have been working closely with CCEA and colleagues across the UK to develop appropriate arrangements that are robust as well as fair. I want to ensure that we maintain alignment with arrangements in England and Wales as far as possible to ensure that learners here are not disadvantaged, particularly in relation to admission to university. However, I need to take account of policy differences between the different jurisdictions and take decisions that, ultimately, are right for the young people of Northern Ireland.

CCEA has provided the Department with detailed advice on a range of options, and my officials have been assessing these and consulting with key stakeholders, including representatives of head teachers and some teaching unions. I expect to be in a position to make key decisions very soon and will announce these as soon as possible. Once I have taken those decisions, CCEA will be instructed to implement them as a matter of urgency. There will be a significant amount of detailed work required, including work to develop an appropriate appeals process and arrangements for private candidates. CCEA is developing detailed guidance for schools. It will be finalised and issued as soon as decisions have been taken.

My Department is also working closely with the Department for the Economy to ensure that those who are taking vocational qualifications are not disadvantaged by the cancellation of scheduled exams and assessments. The Economy Minister made reference to that yesterday.

Members will be aware that the Executive have asked parents to keep children at home, wherever possible, and that schools remain open only for those children who absolutely need to attend. The education sector has been asked to deploy its resources as part of a wider national — indeed, global — effort to keep vital services functioning for the greater good. Schools are not open for normal business. Schools and preschool settings should be open where it is safe to do so, as per PHA guidance, to provide supervised learning for those children who are vulnerable, or whose parents' work is vital for the functioning of essential services, for example, the children of key workers. This is a very last resort: children should not come to school if alternative arrangements can be made.

In recent weeks, between 750 and 1,400 vulnerable children and children of key workers have attended 400 to 500 schools for supervised learning and educational supervision. In these schools,

around 750 teaching staff have been on site along with around 600 non-teaching staff. I should say that because those are the individual figures for a particular day, the global number of children will actually be higher because many parents will, for example, have other arrangements for two or three days but want to have their children in school on the other days. The figure can be a little bit misleading.

On a daily basis, we are gathering data from schools and the wider education sector on the key issues, including the number of schools that are open and the number of pupils at schools. So far, uptake of the scheme has been relatively low, which is consistent with the pattern elsewhere in Great Britain. That would suggest that parents are keeping their children at home where it is possible. That could change in the coming weeks due to the predicted surge, but it will depend upon parental choices. Mechanisms are in place to capture the information that is needed to allow the Department and the managing authorities to refine, adjust and replan as necessary in light of the ever-changing situation. If school leaders consider that it is unsafe to open because they do not have the staff available, they should either not open or limit the number of pupils who are permitted to attend accordingly.

In addition, schools have been working on collaborative cluster arrangements. Work is continuing to bed that in. The Department has been working closely with the EA and other education partners to assign a link officer to every school or cluster to ensure that sufficient provision exists to care for vulnerable children and the children of key, critical workers. The system is bedding in well.

The EA has a helpline for key workers and a registration system whereby key workers who are having trouble getting a placement for their children can request additional help. The number of unplaced children has decreased in a matter of days, from 271 to 131. The number continues to come down. We are confident that those children will be placed soon.

An increasing number of school leaders are coming to the fore to establish cluster arrangements with immediate effect. They are supported by EA teaching staff and volunteers to ensure that there is sufficient provision for the children who need it. The Department, the EA and other education partners will continue to work closely to support that leadership in the days and weeks ahead.

I put on record my thanks to the educational leaders in our community who are playing their part to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers by opening their schools and working collaboratively with other schools at this unprecedented time. We are all in this together, and we simply could not do it without that leadership.

Members may be aware that, on 27 March, I announced a volunteering scheme to assist in the response to COVID-19. The aim of the scheme is to give extra support to teachers and other school staff to carry out the various duties that are required for the supervision of children, and they are ready to be deployed if that becomes necessary. Early figures for the volunteer scheme are encouraging. As of today, 1,088 people have applied to be a volunteer. So far, 882 of those people have already been cleared by Access NI. We are continuing to process applications. The scheme will operate alongside the clustering measures that the Department and others are developing.

Finally, in relation to childcare, I am pleased to inform members that my colleague Robin Swann, the Minister of Health, and I have published a joint announcement that sets out the arrangements that we will put in place to provide childcare for vulnerable children and the children of key workers across Northern Ireland. We have secured a significant funding package of £12 million, which will help to address a number of key issues for childcare provision in response to COVID-19. These include: the need to ensure that registered childcare providers, including childminders, who are providing childcare for a reduced number of vulnerable children and the children of key workers, during limited operating arrangements, can do so without risking the sustainability of their provision; to ensure that key workers and parents of vulnerable children can access childcare places and do not experience financial hardship as a result of needing longer hours of childcare or incurring higher costs for the bespoke approved home childcare scheme; and to ensure that registered childcare and day-care providers and childminders who need to operate longer hours, holiday cover or evening provision are supported to do so.

The package of emergency measures also seeks to address sectoral sustainability by developing a support measure for registered settings that have closed. We all need to realise that we must ensure that there is a childcare sector in place when we come out of this crisis. That measure will interact with the financial assistance measures that were announced by the Chancellor and are being administered

by the Department for the Economy, of which childcare settings and childminders might be able to avail themselves.

More detail on that package of support measures will be made available. Essentially, we aim to provide a bespoke, approved home childcare scheme to enable key workers to have their childcare needs met in their own homes; enhanced support for registered childminders who provide childcare for the children of key workers and vulnerable children; support for registered day-care centres to remain open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children in locations where key workers need them most and for those settings that have been forced to close; childcare advice and guidance for parents who are key workers, including a helpline; and advice and guidance for registered settings and providers. I hope that the measures that we have announced today will provide much-needed reassurance to parents of vulnerable children and to key workers that a range of approved and registered childcare options is available and, importantly, that the additional costs of keeping key aspects of provision operational during this time will not be passed on to them. Parents who need it will not be required to pay any additional childcare costs during this period that might arise from the approved home childcare scheme.

These measures do not change the starting position that we have adopted: where possible, children should be cared for in their own home. Schools, preschool education settings, registered day-care facilities and childminders should be providing care only for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. It is essential that we work together across the education and health sectors to ensure that vulnerable children and those of key front-line staff can access safe and responsive provision. The new measures will sit alongside the support being provided by schools and preschool education settings for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. I know that childcare is a key issue for many parents. It is even more critical for key workers, and we need to support them in the fight against coronavirus. I hope that members agree that the package of measures that Robin Swann and I have announced today will go some way towards helping key workers access a wide range of childcare provision and help to protect and sustain the childcare sector so that it is in a position to remain open or, for some, reopen when the COVID-19 crisis ends.

It is difficult to overestimate the challenges that our society faces as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak. Our lives, family and work are being influenced and impacted on every day in ways that we could never have imagined a few weeks ago. The position on COVID-19 is exceptionally fast-moving, and I have made it my priority to bring as much clarity as possible, as quickly as possible, on the full range of very complex issues that we face. My Department is working hard to support the education sector in the fight against the virus. In the months ahead, the Department will continue to have a crucial role to play not just in relation to the pressure being felt by the education sector but the related health, economic and social issues being felt by our society. I am sure that, by continuing to work closely together, we can make a significant contribution to the overall effort to address and defeat this threat to the well-being of our society.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** I thank the Minister for making his statement. I now invite members to ask questions, and I will allow a period of around one hour for that. It is my intention to allow as many members as possible who wish to ask a question to do so. However, as per Tuesday, that depends on members asking focused and succinct questions. Members may ask one question only, and it must be related to the statement that has just been made by the Minister of Education. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mr Lyttle, will be allowed some latitude, and he can ask two questions of the Minister.

**Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education):** Thank you Principal Deputy Speaker, and thank you for your service at this difficult time. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the democratic accountability that it affords the Assembly. That is more important than ever. I also thank the teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland for their courageous and innovative leadership during the emergency. School leaders have established their own guidance and approaches, and many of our schools are fabricating essential PPE to protect our community. We thank them for that, and we welcome the formal offer to hopefully deliver the long overdue fair teacher pay and conditions settlement. I also thank the children and young people in our community who are staying at home to protect the NHS and to keep us safe.

The Education Minister's guidance to schools is to close, other than to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. That includes children with a statement of special educational need. All special school pupils have a statement of special educational need: that is around 6,000 children across Northern Ireland and, I think, up to 30 schools. The Education Minister will be aware that there is particularly close, one-to-one contact in those settings, so I ask him when he has met the special

school leaders. What arrangements has he put in place to make PPE, testing and medical provision available so that special schools can open? What arrangements are in place for that to be provided remotely, when pupils are at home? What action has he taken to enable the reopening of special schools in due course?

**Mr Weir:** My mathematics suggests that that is more than two questions, but I will try to cover it as one main question.

We are in constant contact with special schools. The member is right about the impact. A "vulnerable child" is not simply defined as anybody who has a statement; it is in a wider context than that. As part of this, there are particular issues with those who are particularly medically vulnerable and those who are not. Sometimes the two can be conflated, although I appreciate that the member is not in any way conflating them.

We are in constant contact with each special school, and the Chair has, I think, made helpful suggestions about direct contact with some of the groups. We find, first of all, that, in the vast bulk of cases, even if their child has a medical vulnerability, most parents have expressed a desire to look after their child directly at home. Many of the schools are not open at present. Where they are open, we are trying to facilitate them, but we have been told by, I think, 23 of the special schools that they have had no request from any parent to be open. It is therefore about accommodating where there is need.

As indicated, where there are requests for PPE, there will be a response. I think that I mentioned that at the Committee. I am trying to find the details. As part of the overall PPE procurement process, while the focus has clearly been on the health service and on health workers, through the Department of Finance's Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), a small stock of PPE has been held back for requests from other agencies and Departments. As a result, a wide range of stock has been obtained, most of which will also relate to hygiene. Stock is constantly being renewed, and there has been a wide range of deliveries. For instance, if you include all elements of stock, there has been some level of delivery to, I think, 580 schools. While there is remaining current stock — things such as aprons and face shields — an amount has been delivered. We have tried to facilitate that where it is needed, where it is necessary and where it has been requested, and that remains the position. Individual employees in special schools have perhaps raised the issue about PPE, but I do not think that we have had a direct request from a school saying that it is closed because of a lack of PPE. Working with the EA, we will be happy to accommodate that, where possible.

On the matter of reopening, there is a wider context that the Executive will have to face, which is to decide when it is safe and appropriate to open schools; indeed, there is a wide range of things to consider. That will be kept under constant review. There are no plans at this stage to reopen in the immediate future. It is important that we get on top of the virus at a time when there is a level of surge. We will obviously tailor any responses that involve the wider school sector as time moves on. It is a moveable situation.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement to the House this afternoon.

Minister, I am sure that you will agree with me and join me in congratulating the north Belfast principals who, a number of weeks ago, gathered together some PPE and delivered it to the Mater Hospital for the NHS staff working on the front line in that hospital. Will you also join me in commending the principal of St Malachy's College in north Belfast, Dr McBride, and his governors and senior management team for making the school available for use by those same workers in the Mater as they continue to fight this wretched disease?

I thank the Minister for all that he, Mr Baker, his permanent secretary, and their team have done. We will reach the peak in the coming weeks, so I ask the Minister to outline what further developments could be put in place for key workers, some of whom may have had difficulty getting their children into school, to assist them to get their children a place at school.

**Mr Weir:** First, I would like to commend those schools. You mentioned St Malachy's, and I understand that there is a similar position with Methodist College: it is now doing that as well. He mentioned the north Belfast schools. A wide range of schools is doing that. I do not want to name individual schools, because I am sure that I will forget some of them.

One of the things that has been very apparent is the number of schools that, beyond simply the role they have played in providing education or support for key workers, have provided and have looked and seen — particularly because there would be more potential availability in the post-primary sector — what stock and resources they have and, where they have found face masks and aprons, they have provided those. I have seen that across all the sectors and in all parts of Northern Ireland and I completely commend the work that is going on.

On the support for key workers, broadly speaking as we move ahead, part of it will be achieved through the helpful development of clusters to try to make sure that there are individual opportunities for every key worker. It is interesting that the pattern has been very similar in different jurisdictions. We had a situation on day one, when a certain number of pupils came to schools. Those numbers reduced fairly significantly within a number of days, but have remained fairly level or gone up at times since then. It is quite plausible that we could see a greater level of peak, so the clusters have a role to play. Those are not forced on schools and there will be a number of schools that will want to make individual provisions.

Given the numbers that have been there, we have not had to draw on volunteers. However, the fact that we have had over 1,000 volunteers — nearly 900 of them have been cleared so far — means that we have a ready group of people, who, if there are gaps in particular geographical areas, can step up to the plate. The best way of providing that assistance is probably through the rotation of staff and, where possible, most of the schools that have been open have ensured that those who come in do so on a rota basis so that they would come in only once every number of days. That has not been the case in every school, but it has been in a large number of schools.

A lot of work is being done by officials to collect data daily. That has been very useful. The helpline and, indeed, the contact with the EA has also been very useful and the numbers of unplaced children are coming down day by day. In some cases, to be fair, some of those referrals go beyond what any school could accommodate, because sometimes key workers will make a request on the basis that they are in work until 8:00pm or 10:00 pm and, generally speaking, it would be very difficult for any school to be able to accommodate some of those people. The important thing is that, when we reach the surge, key workers are not denied that opportunity. I have been taken by a number of schools that are staying open to facilitate maybe only one or two children of key workers in their local school communities, but those schools have felt it absolutely worthwhile to remain open to do that.

Every contribution that every school makes is making a difference. We do not know whether one individual could make the difference between somebody's life or death.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** We are nine minutes 40 seconds in and have had two questions. Just as I asked members to keep their questions streamlined, I gently remind my good friend the Minister to do the same. I am sure that that would be appreciated. I call the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Education, Ms Karen Mullan.

**Ms Mullan (Committee Deputy Chair - Committee for Education):** Minister, I thank you for your statement and the work that you and your Department have done to date during this period. I particularly welcome the ongoing work of the Department and the teachers' unions to bring forward a proposal on teachers' industrial action. Thank you for that.

Minister, according to your Department, 60,000 children are being educated through remote online learning. That is under 20% of the school-going population. I have been working with the post-primary schools in Derry to provide laptops to young people who would not have one in their home. Are you concerned at the level of online learning that is taking place? Will your Department look at providing laptops and connectivity support to those who need it?

**Mr Weir:** If there is any lack of resources, I am sure that that could be worked through. At times, we will get figures that will be a snapshot of a particular moment in time. For example, I mentioned that in one 24-hour period something like 720,000 emails about online learning went back and forward, so there is a considerable amount being done. A number of schools in certain geographical areas of Northern Ireland, where there are particular problems with broadband, a lot of schools have provided packs, so it is not all simply online learning. A lot of that is focused particularly on the post-primary sector. We will look at whether anything else can be done.

I should say to the Principal Deputy Speaker that I will do my lines afterwards, "I must not take too long to answer". I will write that out 1,000 times for him.

**Mr McCrossan:** I, too, would like to pay tribute to and express my huge admiration for our teachers, teaching workforce, principals, classroom assistants and other people who are in schools, helping with the children of key workers in the health service at this very critical time.

Minister, I also put on record my appreciation and thanks to you, particularly during these challenging times. I know that it is extremely busy and challenging for you, and I have to say that you have been more than accessible and entirely open — in fact, you have, I feel, an open-door policy. It is very easy to get answers from you, and I appreciate that.

I will follow on from what William Humphrey said about St Malachy's. The school's very important announcement on entering a voluntary arrangement with its local hospital shows great leadership. I wonder, Minister — you have received correspondence from me on this — whether any consideration has been given to the wider school estate, given that schools in every town and village are very accessible for the testing that will be ramped up. Have schools been considered as places for treatment, step-down services or any form of use by the Department of Health that would be appreciated during these times?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the member. It is important that the public sector as a whole pulls together. The member is right to mention the availability of facilities. Direct arrangements can be made at a local level, but, in many ways, schools remain a public asset. I am more than happy to accommodate anything that is requested. The driver in that must come centrally from the Department of Health. My general assessment — the Health Minister can speak for himself — is that, at the moment, some of the challenges out there are not particularly driven by a lack of space.

The specific case at St Malachy's was that the proximity of its showering facilities to a hospital was extremely helpful. Largely speaking, work around testing has gone on at some MOT centres, for instance. If a location is needed, I will, on request from the Department of Health or the Health Minister, be more than happy to make it available.

**Mr Butler:** Like the rest of members, I would like to commend you for the service that you have given as Minister of Education. I also commend the permanent secretary and echo Daniel's words that there has been an open-door approach. In these unprecedented times, that has worked better for democracy. I also thank you for your relentless pursuit of praise for key workers — our teachers, teaching staff and support staff — and the incredible job that they are doing. Further to that, in my town, Wallace High School, and Mr Monteith in particular, has done a tremendous amount of work creating PPE visors for front-line workers. I am sure that you will want to thank the school for that, as will the whole Assembly.

Minister, you referred to the ongoing work by CCEA and other exam boards. I understand, having spoken to you about this a number of times at the Committee, that protracted and diligent work is ongoing to ensure that the process is as fair as possible. However, I am increasingly coming across households with two key workers. Perhaps both parents work three, four or five 14-hour shifts a week. I just want reassurance from you that such children will not, perhaps because of a lack of parental help at a key point in their education, be disadvantaged in any awarding of marks, especially for GCSE and A-level exams.

**Mr Weir:** Detailed proposals are, I think, effectively, ready. I will update members: the particular point reached this week is that discussions were held with important stakeholders such as trade unions, the likes of CCMS, the EA and other organisations. The discussions identified a need for a little fine-tuning, but, broadly speaking, suggested that that would be the case. One of the slight restrictions has been that, while we want to make sure that it is absolutely fit for purpose in Northern Ireland, we also have to make sure that it is compatible with wider opportunities in the UK and that it does not clash with anything in the Republic of Ireland or beyond. I hope to bring that to a conclusion very quickly. I suspect that there would be more direct damage if, for example, we were doing exams next month and late study had been disrupted. The fact that it will be done through a mechanism — whenever that is revealed — involving a mixture of presumed grades and coursework assessment should mean that something done in the teeth of the result will have very little impact.

As part of the overall package to be revealed, there will need to be examination of what appeal mechanism there will be. Let me put it this way: I suspect that all of us who have stood for election have, at various times, felt that we did not get the result that we merited. There is no appeal mechanism in politics, but that will need to be taken account of here. As with a lot of aspects of society, even the short-term impacts will create ripples as we move ahead. At least, it has not been

very geographically centred. This applies not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the world, so, broadly speaking, it is about how we, as a society, cope with it.

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee this afternoon. Other members have spoken about the Education Minister coming here, engaging and being accessible. He has engaged with me in personal phone calls and been very quick to respond. I want to put on record a comment that a principal of one of the largest schools in my constituency sent to me. This school principal said:

*"On behalf of my school community, I am emailing to thank you for your exemplary leadership at this unprecedented time in education ... You are leading from the front, and communication has been transparent, regular and informative ... I am immensely proud of my own school as we continue to support the pupils of parents who are key workers, and we are fully staffed for the first week of the Easter holiday".*

It is important that we put on record not just the political appreciation for the Minister but the appreciation of principals who admire the work that he has undertaken in these very difficult and challenging times.

Members, including the Committee Deputy Chair, have raised the issue of the accessibility of online schooling. There are schools that are very much tooled up for online delivery. My children go to Wallace High School and Pond Park Primary School and, every day, those schools email my children with online assessments and feedback. However, not every school and not every home has that online accessibility. There are examples of schools that can deliver effectively, but there are also constituents contacting me who are concerned that there is not sufficient engagement and that they are not getting the necessary support to provide homeschooling. Minister, what more can schools do to provide that support? Also, can you confirm that schools will continue to provide that kind of assistance over the Easter break?

**Mr Weir:** Schools are continuing to provide that. I am always slightly worried when I hear praise because I just wonder what disaster is around the corner. I am sure that we have all been there. In Northern Ireland, we have the advantage of the C2k system, which enables that level of delivery for the most part. Now, that delivery will not be to every home or every area and, as I said, a number of schools are then providing material. We are working with schools to see if additional learning materials are required, because not every school is at the same level in being able to provide those. Where help can be provided, we will be happy to step up to the mark.

The member mentioned Easter. Initially, quite a large number of schools were open. Some of those then found that no children of key-worker parents needed the school and have closed. However, the concern was that, as it is outside normal term time, there would be a large drop-off at schools over the Easter period. That has not happened. We are maintaining around 400 schools being open. Indeed, the extent to which schools have stepped up to the mark to provide that level of service is an exemplar for our society. I have been delighted to see that. Sometimes we can see negativity in the news. We can see people breaching social distancing and abusing the system. However, throughout this crisis — and the school system is very much at the forefront of it — we have seen people stepping up to provide the best that they possibly can, and I am proud to say that that has happened in our education system as well.

**Ms C Kelly:** Like other members, Minister, I welcome the positive news in your statement. This afternoon, the Finance Minister announced a funding package for emergency childcare provision. What role will the Department of Education play in that initiative, and when do you believe the new package will be in place to provide the flexibility required by many key workers that has been lacking to date?

**Mr Weir:** Although that was announced in relation to DE, we have been working very closely with the Department of Health on the issue. From that perspective, there has been a particular problem with childcare and childcare settings because the economies of scale have meant that, in many cases, it has simply not been practical for childcare providers to open, whatever their willingness.

A school can open with a small number of staff to accommodate a small number of children. That is, in many ways, relatively straightforward. However, a lot of childcare providers are private organisations and to do that and sustain it is simply not financially viable. In addition, if they were getting a volume of children, there would be issues around social distancing.

The detail is being worked through with the Department of Health. It has been doing a trawl through its HR of those who need childcare, working through the Department's trusts and, in particular, the early learning section. I suspect that we will see elements of this coming on stream at different stages. For example, for the largest volume, we are looking at maybe 75 childcare settings. Some are ready to go straight away; some will take slightly longer. Some of those settings will be reopening after closure.

I also place on record my thanks to a number of schools that, when this initially kicked off, were not in a position to open but have worked hard to reopen. So, if you like, the traffic has gone both ways.

On the detail and practicalities of the scheme, the work that will identify the requests and need with particular childcare settings, or through the other aspects of the scheme, will largely be driven by the Department of Health and the trusts. My Department stands by, working closely alongside them, to assist them in that task, but Health will probably take the direct lead in terms of the practical implementation.

**Mr Buckley:** I also put on record my thanks to the Minister for coming to the Assembly today, his accessibility and, indeed, the leadership that he has demonstrated in this difficult time for all.

Much has been said in tribute to teachers and teaching staff, and I concur with it. They have done an excellent job in difficult circumstances. I also place on record, as I am sure the Minister would, our sincere thanks to the many parents who have stepped up to the teaching role in their homes. They have done so with immediate pressures, whether that is the loss of a job or trying to hold on to a job without sending children to school, as the advice has suggested, where there is an alternative to childcare.

Many have been distressed about grades. I welcome the Minister's statement which outlines a way forward, I hope, in the coming days. There are questions around AQA examinations and whether they will be postponed, and how GCSE and A-level results will be calculated, as many parents realise that a mock examination is not always an indication of the reality.

In relation to childcare, can the Minister outline any plans to introduce emergency schools in areas of Northern Ireland where childcare provision has been lacking to date?

**Mr Weir:** I will deal with a couple of points on that. I hope there has been greater clarity on exams. The broad outline of where we are has been sketched out previously. I want to be in a position where the detail of that can be announced fully as a package, and CCEA would then be ready to write directly to schools and parents.

There has been a good deal of work ongoing to ensure that things are, broadly speaking, aligned. That is particularly important for A-level students. Yesterday evening, I took part in a conference call with the Education Ministers of the four jurisdictions within the United Kingdom. One of the things that was made very clear was that when A-level results are able to be announced — I know that Scotland is in a slightly different position, but certainly between England, Wales and Northern Ireland — that that is done on the on the same day at the same time: that is critical. There has got to be a little bit of a measured balance between ensuring that on the one hand we keep dates as close as to what they would normally be, but also balancing that against the issue of universities facing a particular difficulty this year, and obviously there will need to be a bit of time given for them to prepare.

In terms of emergency schools, we have scoped out a range of options. First, we are finding that the expected drop-off that would have happened during Easter has not really happened. That means that current arrangements are probably working better than maybe could have been anticipated.

Secondly, we are seeing a range of schools either formally or informally clustering. We are asking schools that are coming together — that can be in groups of two, four or five — that when they are doing that they register with the Department, and the first few of those are starting to appear. On other occasions, we have found situations in which two local schools have simply come together; they may not have made it a formal arrangement, but arranged that side of it as well. That seems to be operating as a driver to provide assistance for key-worker children who would potentially be going to a school that is closed. While the numbers are still not particularly large, we started off with a situation where a minimal amount of children were going to a school that was not their own; steadily, that number is growing.

Where we have a final fall-back position, the feeling is that the cluster side of it, as it develops, will actually work and provide the solution. There is also a fall-back that, if in a particular area it is clear

that schools are simply not open and cannot accommodate the children of key workers, there is an opportunity for the EA to open up a school with a range of local staff and volunteers and provide that safety net, but we have not reached that point. With the success of the clusters starting to kick in, I suspect it may be a step that we do not have to take, but it has been something that has been scoped as a possibility if needed.

**Ms Ennis:** I want to thank the Minister for his time here today; it is very much appreciated. I concur with the remarks by Jonathan Buckley and I want to send a message of solidarity to the parents who are homeschooling children at this time. As a parent who is currently doing that, I can tell you it is not easy — it is very frustrating at times. However, there is support from our schools, and particularly my own child's school Bunscoil an Iúir, and I want to place my thanks to the teachers from that school for their support.

I am glad to hear the Minister say in his statement, and other members have alluded to it, that there will be a robust appeals mechanism for the predicted-grades process. That is very important and students need that reassurance. I want to ask whether, given the prevalence of cross-border study, there has been any contact between the Departments of Education North and South in relation to the admissions process and whether the various options being pursued on both sides of the border will have any adverse impact on students from the North accessing further and higher education in the South and vice versa?

**Mr Weir:** We have to create a situation that is seamless for everybody. In terms of direct contact on admissions, possibly uniquely, the Department of Education here will operate up to the end of secondary level and a lot of the work with the universities will have happened through the Department for the Economy. There is ongoing contact, and we are confident that there will not be barriers placed North/South or South/North in the same way that there will not be barriers placed east-west. There is recognition from universities across a wide range of areas. Indeed, I think there has also been acceptance, even on a pan-European basis, that grades will be accepted. I think people recognise the very difficult and challenging circumstances, and so there are ongoing discussions across a wide range of jurisdictions. I cannot say that there will not be some teething problems somewhere down the line, or a particular pupil that is left in some difficulty, but, generally, I am confident that arrangements will be in place to ensure that smooth transition across different jurisdictions.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** I wish to associate myself with the member's remarks, speaking as the Key Stage 2 coordinator for our dining room. I very much appreciate teachers this weather.

**Mr McNulty:** I want to place on record my appreciation and admiration of our teachers, principals and support staff for their versatility and their commitment to playing a very important role in defeating COVID-19. The form of the education system has been entirely reconstituted, and teachers have proven their worth in our communities and our society. I also pay tribute to parents and pupils in the same manner for the responsibility that they have all taken for defeating COVID-19. I am sure that the Minister can reassure the House that grades awarded for A levels will be recognised by universities across this island, across Europe and across the world.

On a more important issue for me personally, I am acutely aware that the enforced lockdown has confined some children to a 24/7 unsafe and frightening environment. Before COVID-19, school was a safe haven for those children, and now there is no escape. The Minister spoke about children who:

*"are on, or on the cusp of, the child protection register".*

Can the Minister give this House a reassurance that no child will be unsafe at home as an outcome of the enforced lockdown from COVID-19?

**Mr Weir:** I can certainly give the assurance that every possible action will be taken to try to prevent that. The concern that all of us have, and it is something that is shared —. I was speaking to other Education Ministers last night, and there is concern and nervousness in every jurisdiction. It is not just about children who are on particular registers or in particular positions. What difficulties will occur in families where, perhaps, we do not know that there is a problem? Indeed, there may not have been much of a problem beforehand, but this will exacerbate some sort of situation.

Every effort will be made to try to protect children. I mentioned that we will be working, in the days to come, particularly on safeguarding issues online. We are working particularly closely with social

services and the Department of Health to try to make sure that the range of services that is available to children, through the EA, will continue and, indeed, be tailored for that. Indeed, that is one of the reasons why, when there has been an examination of the availability of school places, it has not been just for key workers. It was also vulnerable children who would benefit from being in school, and that is why they have been a cohort of those who have been in.

It is also the case that, while people may appear, in particular circumstances, on particular registers, we also avail ourselves of the local knowledge within that. Yesterday, for instance, I wrote to all schools, saying — and I know, from talking to some of the schools, that they have been doing this already — that, where you have particular concerns with particular children, you need to bring those forward and reach out to those children. You need to contact and make that information available to social services. One of the key link points, as I mentioned, is that, for each school, there will be a range of link officers who will be there through the Education Authority. They will sometimes be a conduit, as well, between schools. It is about schools looking beyond simply, "Here is a list of names." They will apply a certain level of particular knowledge to that, and I am encouraging schools to do that.

Can I be confident that no child will be unsafe? Sadly, I do not think I am in a position to give that guarantee, in the same way that we all fear that there will be terrible domestic incidents that will happen through, I suppose, evil actions — I was about to say, "as a result of this". Ultimately, if someone commits a domestic crime or a crime against a child, whatever pressures are there should never be an excuse for perpetrating that. Sadly, while we try to avoid it where possible, I think that we will see some instances of that happening. I cannot give a guarantee that no child will be unsafe throughout this, but every conceivable effort will be made to try to protect our children as time moves on.

**Ms P Bradley:** I join other members in thanking the Minister for the work that he has been doing in these very worrying times and thank him for the measures that he has put in place. I also join other members in thanking all of the teaching family. We know that it is more than teachers who allow for those gates to be opened every morning. I also thank the childminders who are doing a wonderful job. I am glad to note the protections that will be put in place for childcare facilities. We know that this will end someday and we want our children to be able to avail themselves of those childcare facilities. We also know that you have responsibility for the childcare strategy.

In your statement, Minister, you talked about clustering. If I heard you right, you said that it was a voluntary model. Can you expand on that and state how many clusters are up and running?

**Mr Weir:** The latest information, for those who have directly registered, is that there are around 14 direct clusters, involving around 56 schools. We are encouraging those who have made arrangements to notify the Department. Although there are link officers from the EA to help to facilitate this, some schools will want that help and others are happy to do it on their own. I spoke to a school principal last week who said that although he was running a girls' post-primary school, it was adjacent to a boys' post-primary school, with many siblings attending one or the other. So one school was, effectively, accommodating both sets of children. That would not be a formal cluster but it is there.

The reason why it is voluntary is twofold. First of all, while the overriding aim is to ensure that there is somewhere where a child can be placed in a safe environment, the most successful clusters will happen with facilitation, essentially and embryonically, by agreement and on a voluntary basis. It is also the case, particularly within some primary schools but also in post-primary, that many schools feel more comfortable with fewer children. Having a minimal number of children coming through their door can give reassurance to those parents.

With regard to the clustering, we are talking about the overall numbers, and I do not think that any school, at any stage, has gone beyond about 30 pupils. In most cases, it will be below 20 or very low indeed. A local school might end up with three or four children each day coming through the door. It will have a couple of teachers who are very familiar to those children and that school might feel a lot more comfortable simply operating on its own.

Support is available to schools so that if, for example, they feel under pressure because of staffing, that can be worked on either through the substitute list or volunteers. Clustering is not being forced on schools. We are not saying that schools must close to work with other schools. That, as an embryonic level, seems to have been developing. We are in an unprecedented situation, and it is actually about trying to scope out what is best and trying to adjust according to experience.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome the Minister's statement and the range of answers that he has given today. It is always useful for the public discourse out there.

I am sure that the Minister will recognise the very wise decision that was made a number of years ago to stick with AS levels and modules during GCSEs and the fact that our not following Mr Gove down that rabbit hole will benefit him in reaching a decision on how we can move forward with exams.

I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Department of Finance are exploring a hardship fund for substitute teachers and how that will be rolled out. Can the Minister give any more detail on that? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel for those substitute teachers who find themselves in significant financial difficulties at this time?

**Mr Weir:** The Member raises a valid point. I congratulate him: it is probably the first exchange that we have had without academic selection's being mentioned. Even in dark times, there is progress.

We have scoped out a range of options that could be pursued. With regard to substitute teachers, I should point out that, broadly speaking, there are, effectively, two categories of substitute teachers, although there is an invisible line and people can move between the two. The first category covers those who do not have a permanent post in the school, but have a particular contract. A substitute teacher may well be in post for a term or two to fill in for a teacher who is on maternity leave or off work with long-term illness. Where those teachers are in place, and have a contract, that is being honoured. Those teachers are being paid on the same basis as their permanent colleagues.

The member raises an issue that has been a major problem with regard to a large section of the substitute teacher population. They may be described as "casual workers", at least with regard to their timings. They may work a day here and a couple of days somewhere else. That has been a problem because they are not direct employees. They are not self-employed. Even from that point of view, we find ourselves in a slightly different situation structurally from that of England and Wales, for instance. While a lot of those people are also casually employed there, the structures in England and Wales are such that substitute teachers there are largely supplied via agencies, and the agencies have had the opportunity to furlough workers.

Proposals have been put forward. I do not want to speak on behalf of the Finance Minister, but, to be fair, I think that he is very sympathetic to the position that substitute teachers are in. The problem that we have at present is that, in order to do the maximum that we could for those substitute teachers, it would require considerable resource. It is not there in the Education budget. It would be next to impossible to turn round to schools and tell them, effectively, to take a cut to their funding in order to fund staff who will not be providing a service. That really has to come externally. A range of options is being explored. The one problem that we have is that, given the somewhat unprecedented nature of demands, the Finance Minister, to be fair, is dealing with a large range of bids across different Departments. I think that the issue would be relatively high priority, but available resources are not enough and not sufficient at present to meet all those demands.

Each week, we have seen further movement with regard to Barnett consequentials. For instance, last night, we saw that money will be made available to charities. I think, therefore, that where we are today is not the end of the story. We are also looking at whether there are any imaginative solutions, working alongside the Finance Minister. However, I have to caution that it is difficult to see a solution unless additional money is levered in. Certainly, anything beyond that would be suboptimal.

**Ms Armstrong:** I would like to start by thanking the Minister, although I will declare an interest as the mother of a year-13 pupil, and say that there are a group of students — and it ties in with my question — whose mental health must be considered because, as year-11 and year-13 pupils — as Mr O'Dowd mentioned — they do not know what will happen to them. They will be heading back to school. In your clarification, Minister, can you give some thought to those pupils, who are part way through their GCSEs and what should have been their AS levels?

Thinking about that mental health, stress and pressure, how is the learning, medical and respite care that is normally accessed by pupils at special schools being provided to children and their families who are at home now? You said that many of those families are caring for those children at home. Breaks in care can have significant difficulties for those children, especially with occupational therapy or speech and language. Many principals feel that communication, in the tone and substance, has been somewhat lacking. I just want to ensure that their voices are heard today. Can you give those principals some reassurance that they can pass to families about that support?

**Mr Weir:** Obviously, some of that support is health-related, so we are working with Health colleagues on that. The EA is reaching out. For instance, on mental health, contingency planning has been implemented to ensure that counselling sessions can continue. With regard to individual circumstances, we are trying as much as possible, working alongside Health, to ensure that there are bespoke interventions for individuals. Where advice goes out, particularly to schools, there is a difficult balance to be struck and that is on a number of fronts.

Around the work that is ongoing, I will make a couple of points. In terms of the balance, some people will see a particular piece of advice as being too prescriptive, while others who receive the same advice respond by saying that they actually want to be told what to do. You will get that simultaneously. Sometimes people will say that you are spending too long in getting a particular piece of advice out, while others will complain that they have not got it yet. It is about striking that balance. There has been a thoroughness in the advice that has been able to be provided, while, as best as possible, trying to give that flexibility to schools.

It is undoubtedly the case — this was particularly true in the first few weeks of this — that things that normally go through the system have had consultation, either formally or informally. I know that there is often criticism in the body politic that it takes forever to turn particular things around or to do particular things. Things that are being studied and looked at in policy development or implementation at the minute, which might, under normal circumstances, take months or weeks, are having to be done in days or hours. That means, therefore, that any advice or guidance is not, by its nature, absolutely perfect. It is why, when we put things out, it is sometimes on the basis of the best possible estimate of what can be done. I think I referred yesterday to something being a work in process. That is not on the basis of the normal meaning of "work in progress", but it means that it is a process rather than a full stop. It is a comma rather than a full stop, and, consequently, a range of things have to be ongoing.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I commend those teachers who are facilitating some schools to stay open for the children of key workers.

Social distancing, as we are all aware, is very important and it is the reason why schools have been closed, which has caused massive disruption to childcare and exam preparation. I support this action, which will help to save lives.

Does the Minister agree that reports of 200 people ignoring the social distancing regulations, which everybody is driving home day and daily, by gathering for a funeral in Mid Ulster, are deeply concerning given the direction that has been taken by every area of government? While some played pretend soldiers and risked all the people in our community, the real soldiers are battling day and night in hospitals to save lives, not to cause lives to be taken.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** The member needs to return to the content of the Minister's statement, please.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I will. Does the Minister support the call for children and young people to stay at home this Easter weekend and to ignore the actions of others?

**Mr Weir:** This is a period when all in society have got to be responsible. I mentioned earlier that, in the response to coronavirus, we have seen in a very positive way, it bringing out the best in people. From a range of things, in responses at times, it sometimes also brings out the worst. We have seen selfishness in social distancing. My Department has been able to provide further advice on social distancing. Broadly speaking, because of the numbers that have been coming to schools — because parents have been responsible and have taken a view that, where possible, their children should be at home — social distancing has, generally speaking, not been a particular problem in schools.

There was an initial worry, here and in other places, that when the initial decision was taken to try to keep schools open on a partial basis for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, schools would be inundated with thousands of children coming in and it would be very difficult to manage. That worry was not just felt here but was shared in a wider context. People have behaved responsibly. For the most part, very few people have abused the school system.

The member mentioned the Easter period. We are living in extraordinary times, and there has been an extraordinary response. I think that all of us appreciate now more than ever the things that we normally take for granted and see as being normal. For many families, the Easter weekend has traditionally been viewed as the last break before the summer term, before pupils plunge into exams

and such things. Quite often, the period has been used by people to go away and spend a few days somewhere, be it at the seaside or wherever. What I will say is that, whatever the temptation to relax, revert to being normal and do things that you would normally do over the Easter weekend, that has to be resisted by people. We are at a critical point, and all of us have a part to play, because none of us knows whether we are a passenger, if you like, for this virus. It is therefore critical, whatever the conditions over Easter, that people remain at home and behave utterly responsibly. That is particularly true for families with children, who will want to see this weekend as some sort of release valve from what has been happening. It is critical that social distancing carry on until we beat this virus.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his statement, his Department for its response to date to the crisis, and indeed the education sector as a whole for its response, which other members have touched on. I particularly commend the Minister on his collaboration with the Communities Minister, which has now seen the roll-out of money to pay for meals for children who were in receipt of free school meals. We certainly hope that that is what that money is being spent on now.

The Minister referred to the small percentage of pupils who are not getting that access, owing to the fact that their parents do not have a bank account. Can he elaborate a wee bit more on that and on the efforts that his Department is making to make sure that those extremely vulnerable, extremely poor children get the nourishment that they need?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the member for his comments. There are a number of responses to that. We are in a position unlike that in other jurisdictions. One of our advantages is that Northern Ireland is not that large. Whereas other jurisdictions have had to work through local authorities, and there is great work being done there, we have been able to provide a Northern Ireland-wide solution to things, in particular on the issue of free schools meals, because the vast majority — around 95% — of the cohort entitled to free school meals were also getting a uniform grant. We were at an advantage pretty much from day one, in that a large number of bank account details for uniform grants are held by the Education Authority. We were therefore able to pay that money directly. At the start, approximately 4,000 children fell outside that number, but appeals were then made by the EA for people to get their bank account details to it. Those appeals have been largely successful. Additionally, there will be pupils who will be getting processed to come on to free school meals because of job losses in their household and parents coming on to universal credit, and that work is also being done.

That leaves two particular groups, which we are attempting to reduce in number each day. There are around 500 who, we believe, do not have bank accounts, and ongoing work is being done between the EA and those individuals to try to get them to set up bank accounts to receive the payment.

I will come to the final group in a moment. One of the less noticed parts of the funding package that has been able to be announced today is the £400,000 to Youth Service, which will try to target the money at vulnerable children in vulnerable circumstances, because it is also the case that, unfortunately, although paying money into bank accounts is the most effective and efficient way of getting it to families, doing so will not necessarily guarantee that every child gets a proper meal. Youth Service will therefore use its knowledge to support that aim.

In my statement, I mentioned one other group: that of around 360 asylum seekers. We have worked with the Department for Communities, but we are now working with the Home Office in particular. The methodology is that, although they may not have a bank account, more money can be debited into the system used. I cannot remember its exact name.

**Mr Durkan:** Aspens.

**Mr Weir:** Yes. That is it. We are working with the Home Office so that Syrian refugees and others who fall into that category will get direct financial assistance as well. It is about drilling down into the numbers to make sure that we move from the position at the start, where there were 97,000 children to be catered for. That is probably a growing number, but we want to bring down to zero the number who still require that additional help.

**Miss Woods:** I will keep this brief and to the point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and, perhaps, you will allow me a second question.

What provision will there be for children of key workers who attend fee-paying schools? I am talking about the likes of the Steiner School. Can they be provided with support at local EA-funded school clusters?

**Mr Weir:** Yes. The idea with the clusters is that we want to reach a situation in which they are open, effectively, to anyone in the local area. I do not want to see a situation in which, if someone comes to a school genuinely — indeed, that is why the EA is trying to help place people. If a school is closed, there is a helpline through which parents can get in touch with the EA. That is starting to be successful in saying, "Here is a child. Here is what is available in the area", and in trying to liaise to ensure that there is placement. As I said, while there were not very large numbers at the start, the numbers of unplaced children have gone down by more than 50% and continue to go down.

The idea and, indeed, the guidance from day one was that people should not be put off because of the sector. If there was a maintained school, it should accommodate those from controlled schools, local Irish-medium schools, integrated schools, private schools or whatever else. There is no barrier to that; indeed, there is no reason why private schools should not continue provision where they can. If someone finds that a local school is closed, the aim, more and more, is to try to find a place for them. To be fair to many schools, a lot of them will be closed in part because, particularly with very small schools, if there is some level of disruption to their staff, it makes it completely unfeasible for them to open.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** Before I indulge the member and allow her to ask a second question, I would point out gently that there were 17 people on my list to speak in the debate and the member was number 16. The reason why I shimmied other people along was to ensure that the member and Mr Carroll were called. Ask your second question.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you very much; I really appreciate that. What is the Minister's position on Northern Ireland universities being able to conduct admissions in a timely manner, given that the UCAS moratorium ends on 20 April?

**Mr Weir:** The admissions process is obviously a matter for the Department for the Economy, but we are working on a UK-wide basis to provide solutions. That is one of the reasons why, for instance, it is critical that A level results are published at an identical time so that the universities can all operate within that.

**Mr Carroll:** Thank you for your discretion, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to ask the Minister about the situation faced by substitute teachers who work off the register and classroom assistants who do not have a contract. It is concerning that they are still in limbo and do not know whether they will get a pay packet going forward. As the Minister may know, nearly one third of teachers do not have permanent contracts, which, in itself, is a damning indictment of the state of the education sector as it entered the crisis. They are public sector workers who provide an essential service, and many of them are still working from home. What plans does the Minister have to guarantee their wages? To me, a hardship fund does not seem to cover it. What will he do to ensure that those wages are covered?

I have written to the Minister about asylum seekers trying to get access to Wi-Fi services at home. There is also an issue with some of them not having bank accounts to receive payments for free school meals. I want to make him aware of that as well.

**Mr Weir:** I might have to get into the Tardis to go back in time to answer a couple of those questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** Actually, Minister, in my introduction, I said that I would allow "around one hour".

**Mr Weir:** OK. Your generosity of spirit is great.

On the substitute teachers, we can call it a "hardship fund" or whatever else; it is about trying to get some level of funding that is there. The issue is the demands that are there from society as a whole across a range of Departments. At present, what is in the budget across all sectors is not enough to deal with that. As a country, Northern Ireland is largely dependent on what is in the block grant and in Barnett consequentials. At times, that has been increased through, for example, increasing regional rates — there are relatively small levers — but, from a practical point of view, that is not really an option at present. There is no lack of willingness, I think, across the board to try to tackle those issues. At the moment, the economic packages being presented reflect where we have reached in terms of what is available. The exception to that is the broader transport issue that is coming up. It is a question of trying to tailor whatever help we can. More can happen only if additional money can be levered in.

That said, this is a bit of a moveable feast, in that various pots of money seem to become available as we move on. From that point of view, it is not hopeless.

I mentioned that we were working directly with the Home Office on our ability to provide funding to asylum seekers, particularly for children. The Communities Minister has already announced a package that will look particularly at providing food support for a range of vulnerable people, and asylum seekers will, I think, come under that. I do not have details of the Wi-Fi situation to hand, but it could be looked at.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford):** Thank you, Minister, for answering questions and for your statement. We shall now have a brief suspension of five minutes prior to the statement from the Communities Minister. I remind you of my opening statement about using the appropriate doors to maintain social distancing.