



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on
the COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Education

21 May 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Ms Joanne Bunting

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr David Hilditch

Mr William Humphrey

Ms Cara Hunter

Ms Catherine Kelly

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Philip McGuigan

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Justin McNulty

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Ms Emma Sheerin

Mr Mervyn Storey

Mr Peter Weir

Mr Jim Wells

Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. Agenda item 1 is the minutes of proceedings of the previous meeting, which was held on 14 May. Members are asked to take note of these minutes, which I have agreed. Members should also note that the Minutes of Evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report and are available on the Committee's web page.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir. The Speaker received notification on 15 May that the Minister 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 in your pack at page 7.

I welcome the Minister of Education to this meeting of the Committee. Before he makes his statement, I remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. Members who ask short, sharp, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question if they wish, although they are under no obligation. Members who engage in preambles, however, may find they do not get the opportunity to put a supplementary question. I ask members for

their cooperation in this matter. I also ask the Minister for his cooperation in keeping answers short, sharp and focused.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is good to see that power has not gone to your head at all. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I do not write the script, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee for the second time on the work that has been undertaken in the education sector in response to COVID-19.

In opening, I express my sincere gratitude to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their vital and ongoing contribution at this very difficult time. We are now in the ninth week of lockdown. In these unprecedented times, the education sector has faced many challenges. In a very short time frame, we have put in place policies and procedures to ensure that we continue to meet the learning needs of our pupils as best we can. Throughout this period, we have prioritised the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and of our staff. Our teachers, school leaders, youth workers and other education partners continue to do an excellent job in supporting our children and young people and their families.

My Department's COVID-19 strategy supports the Executive strategy and plan. I have been in regular contact with Ministers in England, Scotland and Wales to share information and to discuss our respective approaches to educational provision during the pandemic.

Our schools and preschool education settings have remained open to facilitate remote learning and to ensure that there is provision for vulnerable children and for the children of key workers up to the end of year 10. Youth services have also continued to provide support to vulnerable young people. Since Easter, there has been a rise in the number of children attending the schools that remain open and, although the numbers may fluctuate, on average, 450 settings have been open daily, with about 2,000 staff supporting supervised learning for around 1,700 children.

The work of the education sector has continued to focus on six priority areas: pay; free school meals; support for vulnerable children; distance learning; examinations; and support for key workers. My Department has also worked with the Department of Health in developing the childcare sector support scheme.

Previously, I advised members of a cohort of substitute teachers who were unable to avail themselves of any financial support through any Government schemes related to COVID-19. I have been acutely aware of the concerns of that substitute teaching workforce who no longer have access to secure work. When Her Majesty's Treasury confirmed that those staff were not eligible to be furloughed through the coronavirus job retention scheme, I reiterated the urgent need for funding from the Executive for an income support scheme, which was estimated at around £12 million. On Tuesday, the Executive confirmed that they are to provide part-funding to the scheme of £4 million, and I have reprioritised my 2020-21 Education budget to meet the balance of £8 million. I am delighted to advise members that the Department launched the income support scheme for substitute teachers on Tuesday. The scheme will ensure that eligible substitute teachers, who worked between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2020, will have access to an income for the period April to June 2020. Applications should be made online via the Department's website by Tuesday 26 May.

I turn now to the direct payments scheme that I introduced for families whose children are eligible for a free school meal. Around 55,000 families have received direct payments into bank accounts from the Education Authority (EA) in respect of nearly 99,000 children. However, there were a number of families to whom we could not make direct payments. I am pleased to say that the EA is issuing individual cheques to over 1,600 families for almost 2,500 children, and payments are to be backdated to 23 March 2020. We also have an agreement with the Home Office to make payments to asylum seekers' families through the Aspen card. To date, we have made payments, including backdated payments, to 46 families for 82 children. To date, free school meal payments in the region of £10.7 million have been made in respect of around 101,500 children.

While schools remain closed to the majority of pupils, the EA continues to be unable to provide school meals to children who are entitled to free school meals. A further notice under the coronavirus Act has, therefore, been made today, to renew, for a further period of 28 days, the existing modifications to the

legislation that governs school meals. That will allow the EA to continue to make direct payments to parents in lieu of free school meals and ensure that families do not experience hardship during school closures. The numbers continue to rise as more families find themselves eligible for free school meals. The scheme is due to close from 30 June.

My Department does not provide free school meals over the summer holidays. The Department for Communities has lead responsibility for vulnerable families, but no single Department has the lead on food poverty and holiday hunger. It will be for the Executive, therefore, to decide on the way forward over the summer holidays and to make provision for the necessary funding to support any interventions. The Department for Communities has announced a number of additional measures to provide food and assistance to vulnerable groups, and we continue to work closely with that Department to ensure that food is available to those vulnerable children.

As part of the voluntary and community sector response, the Education Authority's Youth Service is delivering the Eat Well, Live Well programme, with funding provided by the Executive. It provides healthy meals for 3,100 vulnerable young people who remain at risk of hunger, despite free school meal direct payments. A food box is delivered to each young person's home, each week, and each box contains provision for five breakfasts and five lunches. Demand has been exceptionally high, and the programme reached its maximum capacity within three days of operating. Although the Youth Service has the additional staffing capacity to increase its provision, new registrations and referrals were closed on 29 April in order for the service to remain within its allocated budget. Young people who remain in need are referred to other local food providers, such as food banks, the Department for Communities, local councils and other community-based responses.

I have prioritised support for vulnerable children and their parents and carers. I appreciate that school is a protective factor for many vulnerable children. Vulnerable children have been facilitated to attend school where it is in their best interests, and where it is safe and appropriate for them to do so. The number of children attending schools here remains low, at approximately 300 to 400 a day, but that figure is increasing.

The Education Authority is providing a weekly report to the Department on the support that it is providing to vulnerable children and young people. From 11 May, it has been providing an additional mechanism, through which social workers and parents or guardians may seek a school place for a vulnerable child. Requests for placement are being processed by health and education professionals. The EA has also established five virtual safeguarding vulnerable children groups, which are aligned with the five health trust areas. The groups ensure that appropriate safeguarding and child-protection referrals are being made. In collaboration with the PSNI, the EA's Youth Service has provided "spaces of sanctuary" for young people at risk of domestic or child abuse.

My Department is also contributing to the Department of Health's cross-departmental vulnerable children action plan. The plan aims to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people within their home and the wider community. A multidisciplinary joint planning process between the Department of Education and the Department of Health for children with complex needs who attend special schools is progressing on a trust-by-trust basis and includes principals of special schools.

I will turn now to school admissions for the next academic year. Primary placement letters issued at the end of April, and post-primary placement letters will issue in June. Open enrolment does not apply to pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN), however. As a result, children with statements of SEN and profound multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties with complex medical needs or a severe learning difficulty have been identified through the statementing process as priority groups for admission to special schools for the 2020-21 academic year. Children with statements of SEN have also been prioritised through the statementing process for pre-school admission, P1 and the post-primary transition from P7 to year 8.

Officials are continuing to work towards implementation of the new special educational needs framework, which will introduce new regulations governing the statutory assessment process. I had intended to consult on both the draft regulations and the draft code of practice this spring. The consultation's launch date is under review. Work is continuing on the health and emotional well-being framework for education. The target date for its completion is December 2020, but that will be kept under review.

Measures have been put in place to provide support in the current context. The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) is continuing to provide counselling to existing and new post-primary pupils, either by telephone or video call. The Education Authority's Youth Service has created

the Stay Connected initiative online to support young people remotely as a result of COVID-19. In its first four hours, the site registered 1,450 views. Additionally, where concern has been raised, schools are using assessment tools to identify emotional needs in children and young people.

In April, we launched the Safer Schools app, which is a digital safeguarding and communication toolkit for school staff, parents and carers. Last Friday, the Safer Schools app for children and young people was launched, providing age-appropriate advice on a range of digital issues, including safeguarding on social media platforms, bullying, sexting and emerging online trends. In addition, my Department provides funding to support the NSPCC's Childline operation in Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that this crisis is impacting on the mental health and emotional well-being of our children and young people, and I will be considering how best we can support them when they return to school. I am mindful that many will face higher levels of anxiety and distress and will need help with making the transition back to school and with the impact of the prolonged absence. Youth Service also provides support to vulnerable young people. Provision includes online support and communication via a new Youth Online website; one-to-one support where it is appropriate and provided in a safe way; and support for young people experiencing mental health difficulties. The Start programme is continuing to support young people under paramilitary threat. Providing continuity of learning for our young people is a key focus for the education sector. With little notice, schools were able to make a rapid transition to distance learning. That not only reflects the skills and motivation of our teaching workforce but highlights the strengths of our system. Unlike other education systems, we have in place an education technology system that is effectively supporting online learning. Through C2k, the Education Authority delivers a comprehensive range of tools to support teaching and learning. That includes providing devices for teachers and pupils, secure learning platforms, centralised learning resources and professional development resources for teachers.

Advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) points to the need for distance learning provision that is broad and balanced and emphasises the need for a balance between online learning, written and practical activities, outdoor learning and free time. Reflecting that advice, feedback from school leaders has pointed to a wide range of strategies and resources being adopted by schools. The findings of a recent survey confirmed a blended approach, with all schools engaged in distance learning using either online or alternative approaches and many using both. In special schools, packs that contain sensory or physical equipment have been supplied to pupils who need them. I also pay tribute to the parents and carers who are supporting their children's learning during this period. I noted in the findings of a recent survey by Parentkind that the support that parents find most helpful for their children is communication from the school and feedback from the teacher.

As well as the C2k facilities, many schools are using digital tools such as their own school text services, websites, social media channels and individual school apps to communicate with parents and pupils. That will continue to be very important in the coming months, as we move towards a more blended approach to learning, with time spent in the classroom and at home. Another strength of our system is the availability of support from our managing authorities and support bodies. Designated link officers are assigned to each educational setting. Those officers help school leaders remain connected to the wider educational community. They deal with issues as they arise and signpost schools to resources and guidance. Through a programme of work focused on the continuity of learning, the whole education sector has ensured that appropriate action is taken to support the learning, progression and well-being of our children and young people.

Consulting widely with principals, our education partners have worked extremely hard to develop a wide range of resources to support distance learning. They have included online resources on C2k's education network service; guidance and advice to parents and carers on education websites; support materials for parents of children attending preschool, primary and special schools; and third party-funded organisations providing curriculum support and learning opportunities for young people. A recent survey of parents highlighted that almost 50% had used BBC resources to support home learning. I am also pleased to report that my Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) are working with the BBC on further resources that, alongside CCEA's home-learning resources, may be helpful for schools, parents and carers.

The situation is not without its challenges. We do not know the final impact of the current crisis on children's safety, well-being and learning, but, as I have outlined, we began from a strong starting point. It is important that we acknowledge the steps that have been taken across the education system, in all settings, to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning. Working in that context, we are now looking strategically at how to support the system in the medium and longer term, building on what

exists and planning for a return to school over an extended period and with a blended learning approach.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as you will be aware, on 16 April, I announced my decision to suspend examinations for A levels, AS levels, and GCSEs. I made that decision after giving careful consideration to the full range of options and advice, as well as feedback from key education stakeholders. On 7 May, CCEA launched a consultation on the development of an alternative appeals mechanism for the summer 2020 awarding of GCSEs, AS levels and A levels. The consultation can be accessed through CCEA's website, and today is the closing date for responses. My officials have been working with CCEA and colleagues across the UK to develop appropriate arrangements that are robust as well as fair. I am sure that I am not alone in wishing that we were not in this situation and that exams could continue as normal; however that is not possible. Whilst these arrangements are not and can never be perfect, I believe that they are the best solution available to us. I thank CCEA, ETI and others who engaged with the Department at short notice for the hard work that has gone into developing the arrangements.

My Department continues to work closely with the Department for the Economy to ensure that those taking vocational qualifications are not disadvantaged by the cancellation of scheduled exams and assessments. The Minister for the Economy recently announced her policy position in respect of vocational qualifications, and I understand that significant progress has already been made. Last week, the Essential Skills awarding organisations were issued with a CCEA directive to calculate an award for Essential Skills, and guidance is already being issued to learning centres. The Minister for the Economy also expects the ongoing work on wider vocational qualifications to be completed shortly.

I am conscious that some school pupils are more at risk of falling behind in their learning. In response, a scheme has been introduced to lend devices to educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners moving into key transition years. Many schools have already lent out equipment such as iPads and laptops to pupils for use at home. Teachers have made direct contact with pupils who have not logged onto the C2k network to ensure that they have access to IT equipment. In addition, the Education Authority is engaging with schools in a process to lend digital devices to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who may be considered vulnerable and those in examination year groups.

Subject to the necessary approvals, I intend to initiate a three-stage process for the allocation of digital devices to children. Stage one will use existing school stock; stage two will involve 3,000 new laptops that have been procured by the Education Authority; and stage three, if needed, will involve 4,000 to 8,000 additional devices. That could provide up to 24,000 devices to be lent out to students over the next few months. I have agreed a range of criteria prioritising children in year groups 11, 13, 6 and 3 who are eligible for free school meals, have special educational needs, are in the newcomer target groups, are looked-after children or are considered vulnerable. Children who are eligible for free school meals in those year groups but do not meet the other criteria will be considered next for distribution. Finally and subject to availability, pupils who are eligible for free school meals in other year groups will be considered on a similar basis.

Members will be aware that schools are open to provide supervised learning for children who are vulnerable or whose parents are key workers. Recently, there has been an average daily attendance of around 1,500 vulnerable children and children of key workers at around 450 schools, supported by approximately 2,000 teaching and non-teaching staff. The ongoing development of cluster schools to ensure provision for children has been progressing well, and there are currently 131 schools involved in 33 clusters across a wide geographical area. The EA key worker request system had a total of 616 children needing to be placed, and that has been reduced to 42 as of 18 May. Detailed guidance for schools is available on the Department's website. It includes guidance on how to manage social distancing in schools, along with a video produced by the Public Health Agency on hygiene and social distancing in education settings. I reiterate my thanks to the education leaders who are playing their part in supporting vulnerable children and children of key workers by opening their schools and working collaboratively with other schools in these unprecedented times.

Members will be aware that, on 27 March, I announced a volunteering scheme to assist in the response to COVID-19. To date, there are in excess of 1,000 volunteers, and the volunteering scheme has been paused. It has not been necessary to call on our volunteers, as our dedicated teaching and non-teaching staff have been coping well. The Department is planning ahead for the holiday period to ensure the availability of provision and could avail itself of volunteers during the summer months, should the current situation remain.

I come now to childcare and the £12 million emergency package for childcare provision for key workers. My ministerial colleague Robin Swann gave an update on that at last week's Ad Hoc Committee, so I will not repeat any of that, except to say that applications for the scheme are now being processed by the Business Services Organisation, and a reference group comprising education, health, childcare and parent representatives has been established to monitor progress. My Department continues to fund non-statutory settings that are in receipt of preschool education funding and Bright Start school-age childcare funding in 2020-21. I have increased the 2020-21 Sure Start allocation to £27 million — an increase of £1.45 million — to allow services to be maintained at existing levels.

Demand for resources for the Pathway fund for 2020-21 exceeds available supply, and it has not been possible to fund all eligible applicants. To maintain key services for the most vulnerable children and to minimise the disruption to providers in the current exceptional circumstances, I have made a bid to the COVID-19 response for additional Pathway resource. If successful, the bid will allow funding for all eligible 2020-21 Pathway projects.

We are beginning to look to the future. There is a need to help to secure the best possible educational future for all our children in what are extremely difficult circumstances. While tremendous work has been done in remote learning over the past two months, it is important that we begin to see recovery and a process of phased reopening of schools. That, however, must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure that it is done in a manner, and a timescale that are safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society.

The pathway to recovery will follow the route outlined in the education section of the 'Executive Approach to Decision-Making' document. While all steps will ultimately be driven by circumstances and the medical advice, I am aware of the need to give as much certainty to people as possible, so let me set out the likely time frame for schools. At present, schools are closed to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children for supervised learning. That number has been slowly expanding since Easter, and I am keen to see more vulnerable children attending school. Similarly, should the Executive widen the definition of key workers, that too can be accommodated. However, neither action would radically alter the pattern of children currently at school. The phased reopening of schools will require engagement, preparation and the implementation of actions in conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders. We have one chance to get this right, and it cannot be done overnight. Therefore, other than for the provision for the children of key workers and vulnerable children that I have already mentioned, there will be no overall reopening of schools during the remainder of this academic year. The Department is establishing a restart programme that, working alongside a wide range of stakeholders, will put in place the detailed arrangements that will enable a safe phased reopening of schools. The work on that will be conducted during the remainder of this term and the summer. We must all use the time wisely and constructively.

Options will be developed to provide schemes during the summer to make some provision for our children, particularly focusing on key worker children and vulnerable children, subject to medical guidance and in compliance with social distancing. Working alongside other Departments, we will explore the role of the voluntary, community and private sectors in making some provision for our young people during the summer.

Subject to medical guidance and safety, it would be my aim to see a phased reopening of schools, beginning with a limited provision for key cohort years in August, followed by phased provision for all pupils at the beginning of September. It will not be a return to school as it was prior to COVID-19 but, rather, a "new normal", reflective of social distancing and a medically safe regime. For all pupils, it will involve a schedule with a mixture of school attendance and remote learning at home. In line with the Executive's strategy and contingent on medical guidance and scientific evidence on susceptibility and transmission, consideration may be given to a full return of cohorts of younger pupils.

This is the biggest public health crisis in living memory. The Executive's priority is to keep people safe and to support those who have faced real hardship. My Department and the wider education sector will continue to play a full part in the ongoing effort while focusing on the future for when we return to some kind of normality.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for his statement. Eighteen Members wish to ask a question. Question time will last roughly an hour. Eighteen times two, including supplementary questions, is 36. That gives Members some idea of the time constraints that we operate under, so could we, please, keep it focused?

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I assure him that the Education Committee will continue to work with him to ensure guidance and support for our schools and pupils to maintain equal educational opportunity at this time.

The Minister's failure to address post-primary transfer in the statement will cause as much anger as his ill-considered welcome of the inadequate two-week delay to post-primary transfer tests scheduled for November and December of this year. Despite the dedicated and creative work of teachers and parents, it goes without saying that children will be experiencing distance and blended learning in different and unequal ways. How can the Minister justify his support for the requirement of children to sit transfer tests in November and December of this year? What contingency plans are in place should it not be possible to sit those tests?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his support [*Laughter.*] On remote learning, we are trying to ensure through link workers and the ETI — this was raised by one of the trade union officials at Committee this week — that the focus is on the pedagogy and resources available. That is where the ETI's focus will be in trying to ensure that there is as much consistency as possible. In trying to create as much of a level playing field in remote learning as possible, the aim is to close the gaps, particularly in digital resources, as much as possible. Can we ensure that there will be a precisely level playing field for everybody or that everybody will be in exactly the same place? No, I do not think that anybody can do that; that is the nature of things.

It is clear that as much certainty as possible needs to be provided on the choices. This is not an ideal situation in post-primary transfer. The member, myself and others will disagree over the merits of academic selection, but it is something that schools can use as a means of dealing with oversubscription. Also, if academic selection is available, it is difficult to see a route, other than a test, by which there is sufficiently robust data that can be used. Thirdly, I appreciate the very genuine concerns that are out there about timing. However, if things were simply pushed back to a much a much later date, it appears likely — from examining the dates and given the need to work alongside the complexities of the processes in moving from the point at which results are issued to final placements — that that would mean that placements would not be able to be made until the middle of July. I also suspect that we will inevitably have a higher level of appeals, which would lead to appeals possibly going into the middle of October. If we are talking about providing certainty and as fair and as balanced a position for children as possible, a timeline in which some children would not know their post-primary school until some point in year 8 is not acceptable, and that is the driver. With officials, we will look to see if there is anything that can be done to tighten that timetable and make it better by having exams in January, for example. However, it is very difficult to take a great deal of time out of the process. There is a range of, I think, 14 or 15 measures that need to be taken between the results being issued and the final placement. It is very difficult to take sufficient time out and make that workable with a post-Christmas exam schedule. It is probably the least worst option at present, notwithstanding the wider argument that people have over whether we use academic selection or not.

Mr Lyttle: This is not about the disagreement of the Minister and I on academic selection. This is about thousands of 10- and 11-year-old children across Northern Ireland and their best interests. I have been inundated by people who disagree profoundly with transfer tests being set during a global health pandemic. Will the Education Minister use his legislative powers to pause the use of these tests for post-primary transfer in 2020-21, if no alternative can be found as he suggests?

Mr Weir: With respect, I said that there is an alternative. If the member is asking whether I will use my power to ban academic selection, no, I will not. The reality will be —

Mr Lyttle: I did not say that; sorry.

Mr Weir: Well, with respect, the member is in danger of saying one thing and meaning another thing. Frankly, if you are saying, "Take powers to stop academic selection for this year", you are talking about banning academic selection. If the Member wants to abolish all grammar schools, let him, at least, have the courage to say that. Alternatively, if he does not, can he provide another means of selection? There will be schools that are oversubscribed for which selection can then take place. Everybody is aware of the concerns about that particular set of modalities. It is all very well to say, "Stop it this year. Do not do this", but not to provide an alternative to what exists — I appreciate that there are different views about academic selection — would plunge pupils into the void of not knowing what will replace it. If we say that certainty is the key message that is needed for pupils and parents, simply announcing the abolition of something without putting anything in its place would be highly responsible [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Lyttle, you got to ask your question. The Minister should have been allowed to answer it without being interrupted by you from a sedentary position. That is not appropriate.

Mr Wells: *[Inaudible.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Says Mr Wells from a sedentary position *[Laughter.]*

Mr Humphrey: Before I ask my question, I beg your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: it is good to see the honourable Member for East Antrim in this place today.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Humphrey: On behalf of these Benches, I assure him, our valued and trusted colleague, of our continued support despite the appalling and cowardly threat to his life that he received earlier this week.

Thank you for your statement to the House, Minister. On behalf of the DUP, I thank all those principals, teachers, non-teaching staff and EA staff for all the work that they are doing in these most difficult times. I congratulate you on having secured the extra resource to assist substitute teachers.

In North Belfast, I represent some of the most deprived constituents in the United Kingdom. Yesterday, in Committee, I raised the issue of the disparity in learning and access to resources, particularly IT and computers. I very much welcome what your statement said about laptops and about reaching disadvantaged and vulnerable communities across my constituency and, indeed, Northern Ireland. When will that scheme begin to be rolled out?

Mr Weir: The scheme is already in the process of being rolled out. Many schools that had laptops or computers have, proactively, already lent them out. Perhaps, there was a little misconception initially that, for instance, school laptops would not necessarily be compatible with a home environment. However, with C2k, it was fairly clear that it could be done with small adaptations. Those devices have already been lent out. There were already 3,000 devices in the pipeline that were being procured by the EA. What will then be sought will be a movement, a shift towards a small amount of capital. It will not require an enormous amount of money in the grand scheme of things. There would be re-profiling of a certain small element of capital to ensure that those additional devices are provided. That is the aim.

In most cases, what we have found by surveying the evidence is that the principal problem is not specifically that a household has no device; it is that there are a number of people in the household trying to use the device. It is, therefore, about trying to provide that additional support. While there will be big challenges for the workforce when we move to a situation in which there is blend of learning in school and remotely, hopefully, particularly for parents and children, that will enable better and more seamless continuity of learning. We are also looking at continuity of support and what else can be done in the system to provide that level where there has clearly been a gap.

Perhaps, at the outset of my answer, I should have associated myself with the Member's remarks about the honourable Member for East Antrim. I am glad to see him in his place.

Ms Mullan: Minister, thank you for your statement and for the work that you and your Department are doing over this period. I also express my thanks to our teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and guardians.

On free school meal payments, I agree that no single Department has responsibility for leading on food poverty. We must look collectively at how we can continue those payments over the summer, so I was glad to see it in the statement. Minister, no doubt you are aware of the intense concern and anxiety that exists around the reopening of our schools. In order to address those concerns and give confidence to people, do you agree that parents and young people should be involved in the restart programme, along with other stakeholders, and that it is vital that they are involved from the beginning?

Mr Weir: The aim is that there will be an overall restart programme and, within that, there will be six work streams to deal with the nitty-gritty. I am due to consider, very shortly, the methodology of that

engagement. There is likely to be engagement by way of a reference group or something at a high level, and, because some of it will involve expertise, there will be engagement at a more nitty-gritty level. Sometimes, that will involve educational stakeholders. There will be a clear role to ensure that the medical and scientific advice is there, because some of the issues will be medically-driven and some will be education-driven. Some issues will be very cross-cutting, so, for example, I am very keen to have high levels of engagement with the Minister for Infrastructure because there will be issues around what happens with Translink and how we can have consistency of approach between school transport and what is available in school.

There is also a key role for parents and students. As well as the direct and formal engagement and work, I am keen to receive views from, and have as much interaction as possible with, all the relevant stakeholders. For example, last week, I had an online meeting with a group of principals, and I am doing a similar exercise tomorrow. Next week, there will be a question-and-answer session with some pupils from schools. I also welcome contact, either to me or the Department, from individual educational stakeholders.

Although a lot of us sometimes pretend that it is the case, there is not a monopoly of wisdom in this place or, indeed, anywhere else. Therefore, ideas and solutions will be thrown up from a range of different sources. It is important that we have as much consensus as possible, moving forward. There will always be people at one end of the scale or the other: some want schools to be entirely and 100% open tomorrow; others do not want anything to happen until there is a vaccine and COVID-19 is out of the way. The bulk of people want a sensible route that protects our education and health. I look forward to cooperating, working and engaging. Given the timescales, there is the opportunity for engagement, preparation and implementation.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. We touched on the anxiety that young people are facing at the minute. In your statement, you talked about the time frame for the health and well-being framework. That was set, before COVID-19 happened, for December 2020. How realistic is it that we will meet that time frame? Now, more than ever, it is important that it is in place.

Mr Weir: The member is right about the importance of this, and I want to move ahead with it as quickly as we can. The problem has been that there has been disruption in consultation and implementation. To some extent, to sketch ahead, precisely, with full consultation and full implementation is difficult to do. There will be no artificial barriers to that being put in place. As we move ahead, whatever support can be provided, within available budgets, for the health and well-being of our young people, must be provided. Although framework is very useful to provide a strategic direction, we should not wait on a framework before we do some things that need to be done.

Mr Stalford: Before I call the next member, can I also associate myself with Mr Humphrey's comments? It is outrageous that a man of Mr Hilditch's standing, who has served the people of East Antrim for more than 20 years, has been threatened by faceless thugs. We all stand with you, David.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I echo your support to the member across the Chamber. There is absolutely no place for such threats. Other members have faced such threats in recent weeks. We must stand united against those who are determined to pull down democracy.

Minister, I thank you for your statement. I also want to put on public record my gratitude for the work that you have done for substitute teachers. You will know that, for the last number of weeks, we have swamped your social media and email inbox with messages from substitute teachers who have very kindly shared their stories and their plight with us. I am glad that that issue is now resolved.

Following on from the points that were made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I am not interested in the debate over whether we should or should not have a transfer test. What I am interested in is that we do what is right for children at this time, given that we are in a global health crisis. Many parents out there are very worried about the impact that not being able to attend school will have on those children. Some children have been able to avail themselves of tuition and the sorts, while others, unfortunately, have not been able to. Some children can access broadband, and there are some who cannot. Clearly, some children have been disadvantaged, and I do not think that it is fair that the test will go ahead during this time. It raises many questions and will bring about many problems and challenges beyond the test.

Mr Weir: I thank the member, although I am not sure whether there was actually a question in that. First of all, on substitute teachers, one of the things that I was acutely aware of was that, at one end of the scale, some substitute teachers work very occasionally, while, other substitute teachers, particularly those in their mid-to-late twenties or early thirties, with young families and mortgages, are highly dependent on what is effectively a full-time job. So, I was glad to see that happening.

With the transfer test, it is ultimately about trying to ensure that we get the best possible solutions for our young people. The problem is trying to find practical and agreed solutions that are workable. In an ideal world, for example, the tests could be done and an instant result produced, meaning that we could operate in a different time frame. The fact is that, even when the tests are done, it is a number of weeks before results are available, as is the case with any high-level written test. There are always challenges and difficulties, so it is about trying to ensure that we get the best, practically driven solution.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you for answering that, Minister. I did have a question about the GL test, but my handwriting is so poor that I did not pick it up. *[Laughter.]* Has any consideration been given to using the GL test as an alternative to the transfer test? Maybe that would give some ease. It would certainly take away some of the time pressure and would take away some of the stress. It is largely accepted that it could be a good alternative, and I think that it would certainly help those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mr Weir: I thank the member for his helpful suggestions. I will resist, therefore, the temptation to put him in detention with 1,000 lines: "I must write my question out more clearly".

Any suggestions will be looked at. Those are private tests and, from a methodology point of view, there is a wide gap between GL, through PPTC, and AQE. Clearly, there could be discussions between the two. We should remember that the concern has been about the timing, leaving aside some of the broader issues. The AQE tests are usually in November and early December, while the GL test is scheduled for December as well. Therefore, that would not necessarily provide a solution. Schools have made a very clear-cut choice about which of the tests they want. I have expressed a clear-cut opinion that, at some stage, if agreement cannot be reached — there is unlikely to be a single-state position taken — the two organisations should at least move together.

There is a further thing that could be done to at least provide some reassurance. PPTC and AQE must acknowledge that, given the disruption to the curriculum, the tests must be, this year, pitched to a different level than previous years. There needs to be cognisance of the fact that pupils have not been in the position to have the same learning experience. That is notwithstanding all the good things that have happened through remote learning, but it is, by definition, mitigation of what would normally happen. I think that that must be reflected in any examinations that are put forward by those organisations.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister. I go on record to emphasise the absolute disgust that I, my party and, I am sure, the whole House feel about the threats that have been handed out to Mr Hilditch and other members. They are not acceptable in 2020, and they never were.

Minister, thank you for your announcement today. I would like to take the credit for that because I was on 'The Nolan Show' this morning asking for tablets, but I cannot possibly do that. So, thank you for that. I am not going to move off the topic that most of the Committee has been on, and that is AQE testing. It is the most important topic that we could be discussing today, and, up to this point, you have been an excellent Minister.

I was reading through notes, and you even mentioned it today, that on 7 May CCEA launched a consultation on the development of an alternative appeals process, which will be a considerable piece of work. On a number of times when we have chatted about this issue, the appeals process for AQE and GL testing has been one of the major problems in the backlog and the time constraints. Has that been considered? Why has it not been put forward so far?

Mr Weir: I look forward to reading the front page of the 'Ulster Star' where I am sure that the member will be suitably modest in his role in claiming anything. The issue as regards CCEA and its consultation in appeals is of a very different nature from transfer issues, the reason being that, on GCSEs and A levels, what is able to be done is based on a much higher level of robust data. For example, if there is any methodology that does not involve a transfer test, obviously, with COVID, P6 assessments are not there, so you would be going back to P5 data, which, in and of itself, has

effectively been done largely for internal use by schools. Consequently, it is not always done on the same basis and cannot have any level of comparability.

The data for GCSEs, ASs and A levels is a lot closer to that. There is also the nature of the appeals because, while there is an ongoing consultation as regards the CCEA appeals mechanism — so there is a limited amount that I can say in relation to that — the appeals will largely be focused on whether the process was done correctly. It is almost a quasi-judicial review-type situation.

For post-primary transfer — and this is irrespective of whether it is selective or non-selective — it is about whether the parent gets the child into the school that they want or the school that was most appropriate. It is about the exceptional circumstances of their case. So, that is a very different beast.

That, in and of itself, will take a long time to process and always does. You could not simply say, "Have the forms been processed right?", or "Has there been a mistake in the process?", which is, essentially, the basis of the A level and GCSE side of it will be.

Similarly, as part of this, there is the opportunity with GCSEs and A levels, as they reach a completion point in 2021, to take the equivalent of a resit and take a second test to enable those marks to feed in. Clearly, that is not the same as if you are talking about the end of year 8 moving into year 9.

Mr Butler: Minister, thank you for that. You did lean in towards the end of the answer on something about which I would like a bit more information. This is a one-time-only test for these young people, and, unlike GCSEs and A levels, they will not get a chance to resit. On the Chair's earlier point with regard to the Coronavirus Act 2020, in the developing weeks and days ahead when the picture fully builds on the pressures that these young people are facing, will you look at the Coronavirus Act 2020? Given that this is a private test, will you perhaps intervene to ensure that our children are protected and are kept at the centre of this debate?

Mr Weir: I always want to engage, but I do not want to give people any level of uncertainty, false fears or expectations. I have had emails from people on different sides of this taking views. Some people are very concerned even about any conversation about postponement. There is a range of views out there.

I will not bring forward legislation to abolish academic selection. In effect, if we say that the tests will be put off or removed in some way, they can be moved back only if there is a timescale that enables people to transfer properly. It appears that that is not the case. Similarly, if they are put off completely, that will leave a void. That is where there is a reluctance, and I do not want to give people a false expectation of what is potentially likely to happen.

Mr Storey: As a member of the policing board, I concur with the comments that have been made in relation to my friend and colleague, and we wish him well.

Minister, during your statement you referred to the need to have a discussion, and it was mentioned by other members, about when the schools will reopen. One of the concerns that we are picking up across our constituencies is the need for detailed information. Given that schools are closed in real terms and the term will come to an end in a few weeks' time, in June, the time for that engagement is running out. Will you consider trying to have more of that conversation, so that parents do know what will happen in September when schools, in a graduated way, will return?

Mr Weir: First, as much certainty as possible has been put out early. Ultimately we are talking about the details. There are different ways that you could phase it in for schools, for instance there are different ways that the school week could be done. That may well mean that what is done in a primary school is not always appropriate in a post-primary school, because there are particular subject matters.

Part of the idea is to have the maximum level of engagement. There is not a blueprint that could simply be pulled down off the shelf, but, if there was, and it said exactly how this is going to work out, that would, in many ways, negate the whole purpose of that detailed engagement. We want to give as much certainty as possible. There is a space of time, and I suspect that there is at least a little bit of opportunity. One constraint that maybe is not there to the same extent is that some of the detail will have to be worked out not just over the next handful of weeks, but over the summer. The advantage of that is that it is unlikely that there will be too many people leaving on holidays over that period.

There is a wide range of issues that will need to be tackled, such as how social distancing will be managed, what the timetable will be, what hygiene arrangements will be there, even down to nitty-gritty details, so that if a school reopens for different year groups, how they will arrange for children to be left off or picked up. I want to have those in-depth conversations and there will be a lot of work that will be done.

Today, I want to give certainty that there will not be any overall opening of schools this term. We are looking to do key cohorts in the third week of August, and schools are opening in a phased approach from the beginning of September. There is a range of ways in which that can be done, and the details will need to be scoped out.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. Obviously, all of that will come at a cost because it will probably require additional facilities, additional teachers for it to be managed, or other additional staff. What concerns do you have about ensuring that there will be the required additional money, given that your budget has been considerably constrained and that you have found an additional £8 million to deal with the issue of substitute teachers? Clearly there will be a need for your Department to consider the financial implications of implementing that plan.

Mr Weir: One of the work streams that we will be looking at will be the financial asks in relation to this. However, it is important to realise, and I want to be fair to all Departments, that there is a lot of pressure on budgets. A lot of money has been allocated, but there is not some large pool of money that is going to be available. I hope that in the Budget allocation for 2020-21 there will be some extra money overall for schools, which will help with the budget for schools. Will there be money for additional staff or a wide range of other things? I think that is unlikely and I do not want to give people a misleading impression. This will have to be done from existing budgets and existing staff, and it will be about how that can be best operated in an inventive form to help delivery. That is not going to be easy.

For example, in some schools there will be some teaching staff who have to shield and if they are ill there is provision for a substitute. However, part of this will be that, if somebody is able to work from home, the balance of responsibilities may shift a bit so that those who have to work from home will have a much greater role in delivering remote learning, and those in the classroom will have a much higher percentage of delivery in the classroom. It is about shifting some of those responsibilities.

Some of this will have inescapable costs, I have no doubt, but I do not want to give people false impressions that there will be some large sum of money available. Frankly, I would love it and would not stand in the way if the Finance Minister or the Executive want to give large amounts of money to me. There is a former Education Minister here, who will know that if Education gets more money it can always spend it and spend it very wisely.

Mr O'Dowd: *[Inaudible.] [Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Yes, well, let us not get into revisionism.

The likelihood of large, additional sums of money being put into Education is highly unlikely, so it is about people thinking through how we can cope with the current situation — it will not be perfect — from, largely speaking, existing budgets. There will be issues with free school meals and additional issues with cleaning, for instance, that will lead to inevitable additional costs, but, beyond that, there will not be a pot of gold for anybody out there to spend.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, we are now halfway through the hour and six members have asked their questions and supplementary questions. At the current rate, that means that 12 members will be able to ask questions. It also means that Ms Sheerin, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Hilditch, Mr McGuigan, Mr Wells, Miss Woods and Mr Carroll will not get to ask their questions. Can we please pick up the pace? Short, sharp questions and short, sharp answers.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, thank you for your statement and, specifically, for the update on the childcare situation. We know how crucial that sector is to our society and there is a big job of work ahead to ensure sustainability. Has any consideration been given to how the childcare sector can play a role when schools close for the summer?

Mr Weir: I take on board what the Principal Deputy Speaker said. I am not quite sure whether his reading out of that list of names was meant as an incentive for me to be more succinct or long-winded.

There is a package there that may not all be spent within that period, so there may be something going forward. The importance of childcare is widely recognised by the Executive. Again, I do not think that I am breaching any particular confidences when I say that Executive members accept that there will be a need for a specific conversation about childcare, beyond that which is being provided by schools. The member is right: the provision of childcare will be a critical to enable people to get back to work. Therefore, there will need to be a specific additional focus on it, beyond what is happening in schools.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you for your response, Minister. I am glad to hear that the Executive as a whole are taking it very seriously.

Will you outline whether your Department, alongside other Departments, has started the process of planning? Have there been conversations on that and have plans been put into place, especially now that we know that the reference group has been set up? Can that reference group be used to ensure that there is proper sustainability for the childcare sector on the other side of COVID-19?

Mr Weir: The childcare reference group will have a critical role to play in that. The mechanics are largely being handled by the Business Services Organisation and the DOH. Good work is being done. Mention was made last week of the disjoint between, for instance, trying to align the DOH definition of key workers with —.

There is a wider bit beyond the present funding package. It is not just about the wider contribution that childcare makes to society but the childcare settings themselves. Ultimately, many businesses will be able to reopen based on social-distancing restrictions. That will create inconvenience for them, but it will be no more than that. There will be a greater level of difficulty for childcare facilities if they are trying to operate with only a fraction of the normal number of children. That must also be taken into account.

Miss McIlveen: I very much welcome the statement by the Minister, particularly the support that is being given to substitute teachers. Of course, I am not sure whether I should be thanking him or others, because, as we know, success has many fathers. Regardless of the amount of available teaching resources, and I appreciate the very hard work of teachers in providing those, parents and carers are key to the success of homeschooling and, for many, it has proved extremely challenging. The amount of direct engagement between parents and their children's teachers, particularly at primary level, has varied considerably and most of it is voluntary on the part of the parents. Was a standardised approach ever considered?

Mr Weir: The aim would be — that is where the link officers are working, in particular, with ETI — to move as closely as possible to a standardised approach. How much that can be entirely policed, shall we say, is difficult. However, if there is availability of online resources and much more aligned work between the system and schools, as a whole, that will be helpful.

Funnily enough, I think that, while that will create a blend of homeschooling and classroom schooling, it may create an awful lot of great challenges for teachers. I think the much greater involvement in the classroom and therefore being able to give stuff directly will be of assistance to parents and pupils.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Miss McIlveen.

Miss McIlveen: I am happy to give way to another member.

Mr O'Dowd: I was not going to ask the Minister about academic selection, but I feel forced to speak up on behalf of parents who are not putting their children forward for academic rejection — parents who care about their children's education and parents who love their children as much as any other parent does.

Will the Minister assure the House that he will use his energies and resources in the Department of Education to represent all children, not just those currently involved in a debate about the needs of institutions rather than the needs of children? I am concerned that the Minister is distracted in the wrong direction at this time.

Mr Weir: It would not be a Question Time without the former Minister asking something about academic selection. It is very popular to use the phrase, "the new normal", but it is kind of reassuring to get an occasional shaft of light from the "old normal".

We are dedicated to trying to do everything that we can for all children; in particular, we are, as I mentioned, looking at measures that we can put in place for vulnerable children. A wide range of families, irrespective of their views on selection, irrespective of whether they are involved with selection or whether their child is in for a test or not, equally merit attention and support. Part of the continuity of learning project that we will look at will be about what level of support can be given to all children. I am happy to try to treat all children equally and give them the fullest support that I can.

Mr O'Dowd: I just emphasise to the Minister that I do not want him "to try": I want him to treat all children equally in the system.

Does the Minister agree that there is an alternative? Schools that practise academic selection can bring children in under the same system as every other post-primary school — indeed, the majority of schools — does. Ending academic selection will not end grammar schools. Grammar schools are a management type; it has nothing to do with academic selection.

Mr Weir: With respect, I think that the key driver for a grammar school is a level of academic selection. I think that Churchill said, after the First World War, that:

"we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again",

i.e. the arguments in this part of the world resurfaced after all that had happened. It seems that the COVID virus will come and go and the arguments about academic selection will probably remain.

Mr McNulty: I begin by expressing my condolences to the family, friends and former teammates of John Murphy RIP. John was a great Down player. He won the all-Ireland in 1968, scoring a crucial goal in the final against Kerry. A few years earlier, he won the MacRory Cup with the Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School, and my dad played full back in that team. He was an important selector for the Down all-Ireland winning teams in 1991 and 1994, and he selected a very successful Mayobridge club team. I had huge admiration for the man. His picture was on the wall in my school, and, even though he was a Down man, I had huge admiration for him. He was a great Gael. I am sorry for the loss to his family.

Minister, you mentioned the restart programme, but, unfortunately, there is still no plan. I understand the complexities in relation to shielding members of staff and the social-distancing necessities. Have you considered workforce availability and the possibility of using community centres or halls to provide increased space so that the continuity of learning is enhanced by having more kids taught when they return to school?

Mr Weir: Given the member's current haircut, I will not argue with him.

In moving ahead, we should look at solutions and for innovative solutions where we can. We have to make sure that whatever facilities are available are compatible with child protection issues and that side of things. There will be a particular role for the community in providing a critical bridge over the summer. Issues around some of the provisions and, particularly, summer schemes will be about the role that the community, voluntary and private sectors can play and about permission.

As for the detail, the point is that we are at the beginning of a journey of recovery. To that extent, a critical element of the engagement will be to scope out and get the detail on the issues and to get down to the nitty-gritty. In certain regards, even if I was sitting here — it would be a wiser man than me who would have this — with a blueprint of precisely everything that would happen come September, it would be foolhardy to do that anyway without such engagement. On various levels, there is wider support that can be and is being provided by the community. As with a lot of things, the COVID situation can bring out the best as well. That support would be useful.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to our head teachers, principals, teaching staff and support staff, who have been completely disrupted and have had their roles reconstituted but have managed to do their very best to help the kids whom they are responsible for? They have made extraordinary efforts to date and are determined to continue to make extraordinary efforts to educate our young people.

Mr Weir: I am happy to associate myself with the member's remarks and to add thanks to everybody in the education sector. While there is a lot that can worry us about the current situation and there are a lot of negatives, which will exist for years to come, a lot of good work has come out of this, such as the extent to which everybody in sectors has pulled together [*Interruption.*] Is anyone pretending not to be guilty when they hear their phone going off?

The hard work and the extent to which a lot of people in the educational sector go the extra mile is to be commended. Innovation has arisen out of this situation. That suggests that, even if we were in a position this Monday to go back to what previously passed for normal, there are lessons to be learned and things to be put in place. I am happy to echo the member's remarks.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister referred to new norms in his speech. Does he agree that the current policy of providing free meals to qualifying pupils only during term time has no basis in logic, in that, if a child is going to go hungry in May and June, they are at equal risk in July and August? The Executive need to join the Department in addressing that.

Mr Weir: Free school meal entitlement has always been to ensure that children attending school, while they are under the care of the school, get lunch. I understand the logic of what the member says: I simply make the point that that has not been done up to now and would require considerable additional resource for it to be the case. It strikes me that one of the things that may well need to be looked at, as the Department for Communities looks at providing food for all those who are vulnerable in our society, is that that may be the best route to provide it. There is no point in me pretending that there is money from the Department of Education to do that over the summer: there simply is not. We would be talking about something in the region of up to an additional £20 million, and there is no budget for that. What happens over the summer overall will be a question for the Executive as a whole. I do not want to mislead people about having a pot of money that, as Minister of Education, I can simply draw down.

Mr Nesbitt: I am absolutely not saying that it is the responsibility of the Minister's Department only. It is a cross-cutting measure, Minister, and, if you are bringing it up to the Executive — as I hope you will — you could point out that, in the 14 outcomes in the draft Programme for Government framework, tackling holiday hunger will tackle at least four of those:

"We have a more equal society ... We enjoy long, healthy, active lives ... We care for others and we help those in need".

The clincher, for me, to be taken to the Executive is:

"We give our children and young people the best start in life".

Tackling holiday hunger has to be a ticked box for that.

Mr Weir: I do not disagree with anything that the member has said. As for a tick box and to be fair to the Executive as a whole, it is not a question of choosing between good spend and bad spend. We are in a situation where there has already been, I think, over £1 billion allocated through COVID given the pressures that are there, and, if the Executive had the money, they could double that in meeting good schemes. There has got to be a point, though, at which choices are made. I put that as a caveat. What the member has said is very virtuous and something that is actually very good — I completely agree with him in that regard — but so will be other things that, at the moment, cannot be afforded. Therefore, it will be a question for the overall Executive to decide.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. I draw his attention to the educational restart. The Minister will be aware that there is a lot of anxiety at present, particularly on the mainland, about the safety of pupils returning to school. By way of reassurance, I ask the Minister what consideration he will give to adapting or, indeed, adopting what works in other countries that are further along the process?

Mr Weir: Obviously, we must have solutions that are bespoke to Northern Ireland. It seems likely that this will kick in at some stage in June in England, and we will be able to learn from that. One of the advantages that we have is the shared experience that we have with other jurisdictions. Most people will not see me as a great Eurocrat, but we have seen what has happened in various European

countries: Germany, Denmark and other places. We can learn, generally speaking, and see what works, what does not work and traps to avoid on that basis. There are those conversations.

For instance, I know that there are innovative approaches being taken in Germany to getting groups back to school. There seem to be constants, one of which is that we have to be careful that people do not regard this as simply safe. For example, the evidence will create a bit of a differential between very young children and older children. Therefore, it may be that, as we move ahead, the solutions for a six-year-old will not be the same as the solutions for a 16-year-old, and that will be on a range of issues. It is important that we look outwards at what has worked and try to take that level of advice.

Ms Bunting: In the Minister's statement, he has outlined that there has been a huge amount done, rightly, for those who were in pre-measured hardship prior to the crisis, and that is fair. However, I draw his attention to the working poor, who are increasing in number, and to those who are just about getting by and are falling between stools for help. I ask the Minister to take that into account with his policies, going forward.

On the back of that, I know it is not fully the Minister's remit, but, since he provides some of the money, I draw an issue to his attention that I request him to take back to his Executive colleagues. I ask for clarity on childcare and childminding provision. As society opens up and people are called back to work, they are not able to avail themselves of grandparents to look after their children. Therefore, the opening of schools or the provision of childcare and childminding for the children of workers who are being called back to work is becoming critical, and we are reaching a grave and urgent need for clarity and time frames.

Mr Weir: It is a valid point, and I will make a couple of points about it. There needs to be something quite bespoke for the childcare and childminding sectors that takes into account the contribution it makes to schools but moves in a wider context. It is noticeable, since the scheme has been there, that there has been more limited interest in the approved childcarer scheme but much greater interest than we anticipated in the childminder side of it. To be fair to the Finance Department, they have given the scheme a level of flexibility on some of the spend to be able to vary between the different sides of it. We also need to ensure that what is there can operate in the long run and will support that.

The points that have been made about broader support for all children are also critical. Something to bear in mind that, I think, the Executive will consider are the connections within families. At the moment, everything is centred very much on households. It may be that, although childminding responsibilities were previously taken on by grandparents, that is no longer applicable. We need to see where there can be flexibility. If there are, for example, other relatives who are in a position to provide childminding, we must not create artificial barriers such as saying that they cannot come into a house because they are neither a registered childminder nor a member of the household. That has to be part of the wider discussion as we look at the flexibility of the recovery.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members, another eight members wish to ask a question. There are 10 minutes left. I can keep the Minister here for slightly over an hour, but I cannot keep him here for an hour and a half. All the main government parties have been able to ask questions. Therefore, I will go to the bottom of the list before I return to this place on the list.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that slight switch-around.

As the Minister will be aware, there is a growing campaign, given that we are in a global health pandemic, against post-primary examinations occurring this year or, indeed, ever again. I note the Minister's confirmation that he will not legislate to abolish the tests and will look at alternatives, if needed. Will he outline the exact powers that schools have to set admissions criteria for post-primary education?

Mr Weir: Among the criteria that schools have is the power to use the route of academic selection, and a range of schools want to do that. I am sure that we can provide the member with a more technical answer. I will be happy to do that, in the interests of brevity.

Miss Woods: On a different matter, will the Minister commit to involving and adequately resourcing the community and voluntary sector in all planning in conjunction with the Minister for Communities to help those facing holiday hunger this year? The sector plays a crucial part in helping families and children in local areas, as he will be aware.

Mr Weir: There is a critical role to be played by the community and voluntary sector. Ultimately, funding that sector is the responsibility of the Department for Communities. We are happy to work with them. At the moment, given all the challenges coming down the road, I probably do not have sufficient budget to cover all of those things. I am sure that the Minister for Communities would be happy for me to help out financially with it, but, unfortunately, we do not have the resources. Much of this is about imaginative thinking rather than purely resources.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Gerry Carroll.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for using your discretion.

I note that there has been a strong element of teacher bashing in England. I hope that that does not become the case here. As others have done, I pay tribute to teachers and all education workers. They work hard throughout the year and are ready to return to work when it is safe to do so.

The Minister will, of course, be aware of the growing calls from students and their families and teachers to suspend the upcoming exams for this year. I commend and pay tribute to one such parent, Debbie Hughes Johnston, and her daughter, Ellie, who are challenging this through the courts. Instead of a pat on the back and a "Thank you" to our young people, who have heeded the public health measures, we are punishing them by forcing them to sit exams that, as we know, are in and of themselves very stressful. There is no evidence-based reason why the transfer test should continue, not only this year but indefinitely. Does the Minister not believe that, given the fact that GCSE and A-level exams have correctly been suspended for this year, we are, effectively, punishing primary 6 pupils by not doing the same for those expected to sit the transfer test later this year?

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. The position is that nobody is forced to sit any test. There is a limited amount I can say, given, as mentioned, the ongoing court challenge. I will highlight, irrespective of anyone's views on the nature of transfer and the nature of testing, the very different levels of data available for pupils of different ages. For pupils aged 16, 17 and 18, a wide range of data is available and can be used by CCEA to make a judgement on grades, with teacher assessment also involved. For pupils at primary school, the most robust data is from P5.

Mr Carroll: The reality is that having the transfer test later this year will exacerbate the class divide that already exists across classrooms, with those able to afford private tuition in an elevated and advantageous position. Those who are unable to afford extra tuition and resources and those with disabilities or with underlying health conditions who are likely to return to school later than September will be placed at further disadvantage. Effectively, what we are doing is labelling children as failures at the age of 11.

Mr Weir: I recognise the member's desire for a level playing field. Therefore, I am sure that he supports the decision that I made a few years ago to ensure that primary schools were given the freedom to prepare for the transfer test. I welcome his belated support for that preparation for the transfer test.

Mr Wells: I am glad that the Minister has not gone down the same route as Mr McNulty, Mr Hilditch, myself and you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, in having a savage haircut, which is an indication of the times. It will destroy all of our modelling careers for a good few months.

I must declare an interest because my daughter is about to have my second grandchild who, of course, will be the second most wonderful grandchild on the planet after the first one. What guidance has he given to those teachers — of course, it is a very predominantly young female workforce — who are expecting a baby in the next few months as to how they are going to deal with the obvious problems that they will encounter as a result of the virus?

Mr Weir: I am tempted to say that the first bit of advice is that there will probably not be a big cheque in the post for Jim Wells. *[Laughter.]* Specific public health guidance has already been offered on PPE, social distancing and a range of other things. As part of that, from the initial conversations that I have had with schoolteachers, it is clear that they want a level of engagement and input into that but they also want the guidance to be as clear as possible, particularly on issues such as that, which will be driven by health considerations. We will look to cooperate closely with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency in order to provide that bespoke guidance, particularly to those, for instance, who are pregnant, or those who have medical conditions. That will also be followed up in any guidance that is provided.

Mr Wells: The Department of Health has produced very useful guidance for its staff who are in a similar position. Would it be possible for the Minister to liaise with his colleagues in the Department to agree a joint policy?

Mr Weir: I know that specific advice has been provided and has been passed on. We will need to take a look at the applicability, and that is even before the limited opening of schools. As part of that, we will need to make sure that the advice that is there is applicable in a situation where a school is subject to phased opening and where a certain percentage of pupils will be in place. Some of that will involve a certain level of myth-busting because there will be people who, understandably, will be very concerned and, maybe, overly worried and will be looking for particular levels of protection that are not necessarily needed. It is about getting that reassurance and providing that guidance so that what is provided matches what is needed, particularly in the individual circumstances that were outlined.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge the work that is going on at the moment in all schools across the North and, indeed, farther afield. I say that as the sister of someone who is working as a teacher in England who made the decision at the start of the pandemic to stay over there to volunteer and to work one day a week.

As the Minister said, we will, at some stage, return to school openings and he mentioned the new normal. Can he give us an idea of the type of equipment, PPE and school sanitisation that will be required when we open and whether schools will receive notification of that?

Mr Weir: PPE stock is available at the moment. The Finance Minister, in cooperation with the Health Minister, made a pool of PPE stock available to other Departments and arm's-length bodies on request. That is something that has to be married to the need. I have given indications that detailed guidance will be provided. Precise requirements will need to be scoped out. Again, the specification that may be applicable in a primary school may not necessarily be exactly the same as that which is needed in a post-primary school. It is critical that a range of additional provision will be required. We will be working to scope that out while taking the clear-cut advice of health professionals, working alongside the likes of the trade unions to make sure that what is needed is got and is delivered on the ground.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you. So, you are saying that it will be provided for centrally. Will schools receive notification of who is responsible? For example, if schools have to be sanitised, will notification go out about who is responsible for carrying that out or will teaching staff and classroom assistants be expected to carry it out themselves?

Mr Weir: Whilst some schools will go out to those beyond the EA, most schools will use the Education Authority's cleaning services. So far, additional costs for cleaning have already been met. Very clear guidance will be given to schools on what will be required and what provision will be made.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I thank you personally for dealing with the individual constituency queries that I sent you. I wish other Ministers were as diligent in dealing with individual requests from MLAs. Having said that, I associate myself with my colleague Chris Lyttle's earlier comments regarding the transfer test.

My question relates to children who attend key worker schools. I have a constituent whose eight-year-old son has autism and was arbitrarily told just last week that he could not return to school because he could not practice social distancing. What will you do about children with autism?

Mr Weir: I thank the member for her question, or at least the first 30 seconds of it.

One of the areas that we are looking at in the work streams is what particular provision will need to be made for children with special educational needs — not simply those within special schools — and, sometimes, those with medical needs. We need to ensure, therefore, that what is provided is tailored, as far as possible, for those needs on an individual basis.

Obviously, I am not aware of the specific case, but there is an acceptance that there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution, and we need to work out what provision can be made. Good work has been done with some of the special schools, but there anxiety remains around those schools. That is why an inter-disciplinary team for some children with critical needs is being considered.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for your answer. Moving on, when will you engage with the principals of those special educational needs schools on their reopening?

Mr Weir: That will be part of the process. As well as the broader strategic level, on which we will be looking for input, there are six work streams, one of which deals with special education. So, that will be very useful for discussion. Where school principals are looking to contact the Department of Education or contact me, I am always happy to get that information and have as many conversations as possible.

Mr Hilditch: I thank members and officers of the Assembly for their support, publicly and privately, over the past few days. Thank you.

Minister, thank you for the statement. You mentioned that the laptop provision will be prioritised to the disadvantaged and the vulnerable and to certain groups that will be doing their exams in the coming year. Is that part of a wider plan for mitigating educational loss for those key groups?

Mr Weir: Yes, very much so. The aim will be to make sure that there is provision for everyone. The point about prioritisation is to have some sequencing so that, as things become available, they are made available. The member mentioned mitigation on the basis of key examinations, which is something that seems to be accepted across different jurisdictions. At post-primary level, years 11 and 13, where people are starting their GCSEs and A levels, are seen as the most important cohorts. I suspect that that is why those cohorts and those who are in the transition year and the final year of primary school will be concentrated on for an earlier start than others.

The IT side is one element of the broader response. Again, part of this is trying to be as inventive with resources as possible. There will also be a broader challenge, which will be accepted across different jurisdictions, in that there will probably need to be some alteration to the curriculum as we move ahead. No matter how good the work that is being done is, there will be some implications for the curriculum. That will need to be accepted on a wider basis and it is likely to be, but it will have implications, not just for here but for other jurisdictions as well.

Mr Hilditch: I will not delay the Minister any further; he has a busy schedule.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): A sentiment that I am sure will be shared by Mr Philip McGuigan.

Mr McGuigan: Before I ask my question, I want to put on record, on behalf of me and my party, our condemnation of the threat that was made to Mr Hilditch earlier in the week.

Minister, thank you for your statement and the sentiments in it, particularly, as others indicated, those about the fact that schools reopening must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure the safety of staff and pupils alike. It is pretty clear, even at this stage, that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to the preparation for opening schools. Different schools in different settings will require different criteria, whether it is because of the number of pupils enrolled, because of the space internally and outside the school or because, as you said, the issues with transport to and from schools and the resources available. Does the Minister agree with that sentiment and will individual schools be allowed flexibility in their preparation of determining how they can reopen safely?

Mr Weir: The member raises a very good point. There is a balance. We must try to have a level of flexibility in individual circumstances, and it may well be that that will be over certain practical arrangements. Balanced against that, when I talk about different positions, it may well be that the approach that you take to 15-year-olds will be different to the approach you take to five-year-olds, for instance. Therefore, there may well be a level of divergence between what is done precisely, for instance, in primary and post-primary schools. That may be more in terms of what way weeks are scheduled.

There will be limitations on the level of flexibility because we also want to ensure that there is consistency among schools. For example, we do not want, in one school, such-and-such a year group to be in school four days a week and only at home one day a week but, in another school two miles down the road, because of its circumstances, children of the same age are in on only one day a week. I do not particularly want to take a Stalinist-type approach, which may disappoint Mr Carroll —.

Mr Carroll: *[Inaudible]*

Mr Weir: What, sorry?

Mr Carroll: I am not a Stalinist.

Mr Weir: That is good to know, or whatever.

From that point of view, it cannot be a command economy that dictates down, but I want to see at least a level of consistency while allowing that flexibility. The member raises a valid point, and how we get that balance right will be a very tricky question. It may well be that whatever is there on day one or week one has to be adjusted as we move ahead, because, no matter how much preparation work is done and no matter how much good thinking and consensus there is, will everything be right on the first day or will there be teething problems? Do we know precisely what to expect? The answer to those questions is that it is likely that there will be some adjustments.

Mr McGuigan: I would not ask the Minister to take a Stalinist approach, but perhaps he could read some of Marx's writings.

Following on from my constituency colleague's comments about additional resources probably being required, in some instances, extra resources will be required, particularly extra support for special schools and schools containing pupils with special needs.

Mr Weir: Again, it is a valid point. I am probably more of a Menshevik than a Bolshevik in that regard. There will undoubtedly be some areas where there are additional pressures that will need some additional resources. To some extent, there will have to be creative thinking to work out where the budget for it lies. I do not mean this facetiously, but if the member is able to work alongside the Minister of Finance and persuade him to provide some of that budget, I would be extremely grateful. I want to make sure that people do not have a wrong assumption that there will be a large amount of additional resources, but, clearly, there will be some pressure, as you mentioned.

On the issue of entitlement to free school meals and where we are with uniform grants, even if there is no change to any of the criteria, there will be additional demands on those, which, rightly, will have to be met. Leaving aside the teaching side of it, there are likely to be additional pressures on things such as additional cleaning materials, but that may also generate some easements in the system. I suspect that the easements will be far outweighed by the additional cost, so it is a mixture of trying to see from where additional resources can be got and where they can be effectively recycled.

Mr O'Toole: I join others in condemning the appalling threats made against Mr Hilditch. It is good to see him here today facing down that unacceptable behaviour.

Minister, I will make two statements that I presume you will not disagree with. First, every single piece of available evidence shows that poorer kids have worse outcomes from the 11-plus and transfer tests; and secondly, basically everyone agrees that poorer kids are more vulnerable to worse educational outcomes as a result of this crisis and the shutdown. That is evidenced by the fact that your Department has taken very welcome steps to mitigate that. Do you therefore agree, following those two statements, that proceeding with transfer tests this year will mean that poorer kids do worse?

Mr Weir: With respect, I am not prepared to write off children. Undoubtedly, there are inequalities in society, and, where we can, we have to try to mitigate them. My concern is partly driven by a belief that if there is no opportunity for academic selection we will move, whether it is in the short term or the long term, much more to the situation that we see in England and other places. Selection will happen in some shape or form, because there will always be schools that are oversubscribed and some that are undersubscribed.

If we move to a situation in which academic selection is removed, we move to a scenario in which it is much more likely that we will see the development of people with the ability to pay to go to the best schools. There are undoubtedly concerns about whether there is a level playing field. The member is right about that; I do not disagree. The issue is whether we take steps that will create a system in which that playing field becomes more level or it becomes something that, if we remove academic selection, the advantage of money makes more uneven.

Given where we are, if there is to be academic selection there will need to be some formal test, and that is axiomatic. The situation means that we have to put in place as many measures as possible to

help all children, irrespective of whether they are doing the test, to recover from the disruption to the continuity of learning. Are we going to be in a situation that is not perfect? I do not think that anybody is pretending otherwise.

Mr O'Toole: Just briefly, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I take it from that answer that the Minister does not dissent from the statements that I made, and I am grateful for that. Has a single parents' group, teaching union or other relevant stakeholder group got in touch with him to say that they support transfer tests proceeding this autumn?

Mr Weir: Yes, parents have certainly been in touch. The teaching unions have a long-standing position. It will not come as a great surprise to learn that pretty much all teaching unions have at least an official position against academic selection, which is very sincerely held. I appreciate that there are different views on it across the Chamber, but if I was to find a teaching union in current circumstances that has suddenly reversed its opinion and is supportive of academic selection, it would be something of a Damascene conversion. I am not anticipating it.

However, amongst parents there is a wide range of views. Set against that are the practicalities. A lot of parents will express the view that they would like to see the test put off but are still in favour of academic selection. As I indicated, the problem with that is doing it in a timescale that enables people to transfer properly. Transfer from primary to post-primary is a complex process. It is not something that can simply be truncated to a couple of weeks. I think that the problem is the issue of timing.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Yes.

Mr Lyttle: You, fairly, reminded me of my responsibility not to speak from a seated position, and I am grateful, genuinely, for the expert job that you are doing in chairing these sessions. However, to be fair, the Minister of Education wholly misrepresented my question — on contingency plans and the suspension of post-primary transfer for 2020 — as a call to ban grammar education. Will you be reminding the Education Minister of his responsibility not to misrepresent Members of the Assembly in order to divert from the inadequacy of his action on matters of public concern?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member may ask a question, and the Minister may not like the question; the member will get an answer, and the member may not like the answer. It is not the role of the Chair to determine on the content of questions or answers. I do not think that that was a point of order, strictly speaking, but you have got your comments into Hansard and they are on the record.

Agenda item 3 is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have yet to receive confirmation from the Executive about when Ministers will next come to make statements to the Committee. As soon as confirmation has been received, written notification of the time, date and place of our next meeting will be issued to members in the usual way.

I remind members that a plenary session of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 2 June and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days.

That concludes the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Stay safe.