



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Restart:
Department of Education and
Education Authority

2 September 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Adrian Murphy	Department of Education
Mr John Smith	Department of Education
Ms Michele Corkey	Education Authority
Mr Dale Hanna	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome John Smith, deputy secretary of the Department of Education; Adrian Murphy, head of area planning, north region; and Michele Corkey and Dale Hanna of the Education Authority (EA). I advise the witnesses that proceedings will be reported by Hansard and invite them to make an opening statement.

Mr John Smith (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair. I will give you a brief opening statement on the Restart programme. You heard from the Minister a couple of weeks ago on the 'New School Day' guidance. We are here today to brief you on some of the broader aspects of what we have been doing over the summer.

You are aware that we have divided the Restart programme into a number of priorities. I will take them briefly in turn. On physical protection, we are working closely with the Education Authority to ensure that the risk of COVID transmission is minimised. Obviously, that includes making sure that there is enough cleaning and hygiene equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE) available to all schools, as appropriate, when they need it.

With regard to the well-being strand, we published updated guidance on supporting staff to return to schools on 10 August. That was to provide support for principals and line managers for when they are bringing staff back into the workplace. You will also be aware that, prior to COVID, we were working collaboratively with a number of other Departments on the framework for children and young people's emotional health and well-being. That work is still progressing, and its main emphasis is to support schools to promote emotional health and well-being at a universal level. We hope to complete that work by the end of this calendar year. We are doing all we can to support pupils as they return to

school this week. The well-being section of the EA website has been updated, and a multidisciplinary helpline has been set up. There is a compendium of resources available on the EA website to help schools and pupils in that regard.

Turning to the 'New School Day' guidance, which you heard about comprehensively from the Minister and officials a couple of weeks ago, we published our revised guidance on 13 August. I am keen to point out that, whilst we developed that at pace, it was the culmination of three months of effort involving ourselves, the Public Health Agency (PHA), the practitioners' group and representatives of trade union side. We do not view the publication of that revised guidance as being the end of the process, and we want to pick up again in the forthcoming weeks with the practitioners' group and the trade unions and managing authorities to work through some of the operational aspects of that guidance. As I said, it is not the end of the process; it is very much ongoing.

On support for vulnerable pupils, during the summer, as you will be aware, we provided funding for approximately 50 summer schools to enable pupils to take part in a range of activities and get them socialising again, learning and having fun. We purchased virtual learning resources for children who are going into P7 to help them with literacy and numeracy. We are developing the Engage programme, which will help all pupils but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who will benefit most from additional support to engage with their learning following the lockdown of schools. As you will also be aware, since May 2020 we have been lending digital devices to vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to help them to learn from home. That programme has continued across the summer, with many thousands of digital devices being delivered to date. We will continue to roll out that provision of devices throughout September.

On standards and learning, we published guidance to help schools on their curriculum planning, because they will need to consider how they tailor and adapt their curriculum delivery for this academic year. The Education Authority's "Supporting Learning" web pages have been revised to take account of Restart. More recently, you will be aware that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has launched a two-week consultation on the arrangements for next year's qualifications and is publishing proposals on how it might adapt the GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications to take account of the public health position. Those proposals will also seek to address lost learning time and aim to reduce the burden of assessment on young people. Obviously, everyone wants clarity on the arrangements for next year as soon as possible, but it is important that CCEA takes time to reflect on the lessons from the last three to six months and ensures that the proposals that it brings forward take account of the challenges facing young people. We encourage young people, teachers, parents and school leaders to take part in the consultation and put their views to CCEA.

Turning to the childcare work stream, the recovery scheme was launched on 27 July after the Executive agreed a £10.5 million package of support. That covered the period, which has expired, of 1 July to 31 August. The closing date for applications is 11 September. To date, the indications are of strong uptake of the scheme; about 70% of the fund has already been allocated to providers.

Clearly, schools have returned in full and are full-time for all pupils this week. I will briefly outline some of the support arrangements that we have put in place for schools to help them as they get back up to speed. In the EA, we established a network of link officers. In fact, they have been in place since phase 1 of the lockdown of schools. Those link officers are still in place, and they are really designed as the first point of contact for school principals for any issues or for points of clarification on restarting their schools or the 'New School Day' guidance. We have backed that up with a dedicated Restart helpline under the EA, and there are resources on the EA website in terms of frequently asked questions. The EA has also established a COVID-19 helpline, which is for schools to phone if they have a confirmed case of COVID. As I said, the link officers will remain in place for the foreseeable future and act as the lead contact. Hopefully that will mean that queries, problems and issues can be resolved quickly.

The Minister wrote directly to all parents on 13 August. In addition to that, the Department's website has a section for parents and carers which we have developed. There are a lot of resources available on the DE website. Recently we have established even closer links with our colleagues in the Department of Health, to the extent that twice a week we are meeting the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the chief executive of the PHA and their deputies to really keep a close eye on issues that need to be resolved as schools return, so that we can resolve any problems as quickly as we can in an operational sense.

That is a brief overview of progress over the last number of months, and we are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks very much, John. Can I ask, respectfully, why the Minister and the permanent secretary are not able to attend the Committee today, given the context that we are in?

Mr Smith: Pre-booked diary commitments, Chair; that is all there is to it on that one.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is it possible to detail to the Committee what those pre-booked diary commitments were, in order to assess the prioritisation of those pre-booked diary commitments over addressing the Education Committee in the week that schools started back further to a COVID-19 lockdown?

Mr Smith: Certainly we can come back to you on that, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is greatly appreciated. I just have a few questions, and I am keen to make sure that we get all members in and that we ask as many questions as possible.

Can I give the Department an opportunity to really emphasise the messaging for schools and parents on what the precise symptoms are with which a pupil would not attend school and would self-isolate at home?

Mr Adrian Murphy (Department of Education): Chair, I will cover that. It is a continuous cough that lasts for more than an hour or a high temperature or a loss of taste. It is the standard definition of symptoms that is in the public health guidance of the Public Health Agency and is used across the UK. This does not include the typical sniffles and snuffles that will come from a cold. In particular, the coughing has to be a long and persistent cough. Those are the symptoms and the basis of what we are using to manage and control the system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Once the pupil is quarantined at home, the procedure is to seek a test as promptly as possible.

Mr Murphy: Sorry, Chair, I did not quite get that. Can you repeat that, please?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I also give you the opportunity to set out what the process is for testing?

Mr Murphy: OK. On testing, you have to be mindful of two processes. If you, as an individual, are already at home and feel that you have symptoms of a high temperature, a cough and/or a loss of taste, you and anybody who is symptomatic can book a test through either the Public Health Agency website or the 111 number. They will book that test. It is usually available on the day or within 24 hours, and they will get a result within 12 to 24 hours. On the testing and tracing of a child who is in school and shows symptoms, the position is the standard Public Health Agency guidance for any contagious disease or virus: you isolate the child to protect both them and the wider school population. There is guidance in 'New School Day' about how that should be operated. It is fairly standard that you would isolate them, take care of them, maintain supervision of them and look for them to be brought home as soon as possible. It is no different from what it would be in the case of somebody breaking an ankle or whatever else in school: you would look after them until a parent comes home.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If a pupil is quarantined and receives confirmation of a positive test, what does that mean for other pupils who may have been in contact with that pupil, and what, indeed, is the definition of "contact"?

Mr Murphy: The definition of contact used by the PHA is less than 2 metres for a sustained period of around 15 minutes. That is the definition of contact that has been used throughout the UK. If a pupil, either at home or after school, has a positive test, the head teacher will be asked who are the contacts — the classmates — of that child and to provide that information to the Public Health Agency's test-and-trace system. In the end, it will be for those operating the test-and-trace system to decide who the contacts are after speaking to teachers or classroom assistants or to the individuals. They will follow that test-and-trace process to contact those individuals.

There may be a time lag between a parent contacting a school to say that their son or daughter has tested positive and the test-and-trace system coming into place. In the interim, the school will likely be advised to recommend that the entire class self-isolate as a precaution. That will make sure that all the possible contacts self-isolate and minimise the risk of transmission.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If a test is negative, will a pupil or, indeed, a staff member still be required to quarantine for 14 days? I understand that there is some confusion about that, and some communication has suggested that those with a negative result can return to school.

Mr Murphy: If somebody has symptoms, they and their family should self-isolate in line with the Public Health Agency guidance. If they get a test and it is negative, there are no other symptoms in the family and/or their family members also have negative tests, it is clearly not COVID. If everybody has a negative test, it is another virus, flu, a cold or whatever. Assuming that people are well and have no further high temperatures or other symptoms, they are well enough to go back to work. The guidance currently says 48 hours, and that is just general guidance. You can return to school or work when you are healthy after getting a negative test.

The position is different when you are defined as a contact of someone who has tested positive. If your phone dings and tells you that you have been a contact or if contact tracing contact you, it is a definite case of COVID and the recommendation and the Public Health Agency guidance is that you and all your family members should self-isolate for 14 days, whether or not you are symptomatic. That allows the breaking of the transmission of the virus. We do not want people to self-isolate if they suspect that they have a virus that turns out to be a common cold or some other ongoing bout of sickness.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, that clarification is helpful.

There seems to be general feedback from principals and parents that accessing timely advice and guidance has been extremely challenging; indeed, a number of teaching and non-teaching representative bodies have called for bespoke helplines for principals and parents. What is the Department's response to those requests?

Mr Murphy: The position is that the Public Health Agency should be contacted only when there is a confirmed case. That is their *raison d'être*. They want to deal with the management of confirmed cases. They do not have the resource capacity to deal with general enquiries from parents or principals, or to give advice. In fact, when principals and parents do so, they are clogging up the lines, as it were, for genuine cases and holding back the work of the PHA. That is why, in the interim, the guidance will be for teachers to look for guidance and information through their link officers, who will be trained up and who have already been taken through the 'New School Day' guidance and the public health guidance. Next week, we expect that they will receive further training from the Public Health Agency on further aspects of that.

Fear and anxiety is always a real problem for the general public. The trouble is that, in some respects, some of the queries are rather far-fetched. All we can do is to point people to the public health guidance and the 'New School Day' guidance and to make sure that people read it in full.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I imagine that we will want to follow up on that with you and that other members may want to come in it.

Mr Smith: Could I just amplify and add to what Adrian said, Chair?

This is complicated stuff. We put together the 'New School Day' guidance with our PHA colleagues, and only when schools come back can it start to be tested in all of the different scenarios. That is why we have worked out a series of flowcharts and checklists specifically focused on what schools should do in the event of a suspected or unconfirmed case of COVID in their school and in a confirmed COVID case, and we distributed those to schools.

That was done in response to feedback that we had from a number of schools on seeking more clarity on the precise operational aspects of what they should do. We will keep that under review. We have really close links with our colleagues in health and the PHA, and we are in daily contact with them. We will resolve any inconsistencies or issues where clarity is needed as soon as we possibly can. As I said earlier, we have link officers in place around the network of schools, there are helplines in place in the EA that school principals can phone and, where there are confirmed cases of COVID in schools,

the PHA track-and-trace system will kick in and proactively help school principals and give them advice on precisely what they need to do. It is an ongoing process, as I said, and we will keep everything under review and refine it as we need to as we go forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Karen, would you like to supplement that in particular?

Ms Mullan: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead.

Ms Mullan: John, we need that clarity ASAP. Yesterday morning, I heard the Minister, a principal and the Chief Medical Officer on different radio programmes, giving three different variations of the guidance. Principals are very clearly telling us that they do not know. As a member of this Committee, as an MLA and as a parent, I have been contacted and asked for advice. I am asking for that clarity to be given ASAP.

Mr Smith: Absolutely. I appreciate that. I totally agree with you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I want to raise the issue of extremely clinically vulnerable pupils or pupils with relatives who are extremely clinically vulnerable. My understanding is that the guidance says that pupils who are extremely clinically vulnerable — I think that is pupils who were previously shielding — should seek advice and guidance from their GP or their consultant with regard to the appropriateness of them returning to school. My understanding is that, for a pupil with a relative who is extremely clinically vulnerable, a "risk assessment" is to be conducted. This seems to be creating significant confusion, anxiety and challenge. The guidance suggests that those processes are in place to help pupils, families, principals decide on a return to school for pupils in those two categories, but are they working? Perhaps you can give us more detail on that.

Mr Murphy: Chair, I am happy to give some guidance on that. We are led by the Public Health Agency guidance on this, which is that shielding has been paused and that all individuals who have been shielding, in whatever category, should simply follow the normal, routine hygiene guidance, such as "Catch it, bin it, kill it" etc, that the rest of the general population has been given and should be extra mindful of compliance with that guidance. It is only an extra bit of caution.

The inclusion of a risk assessment was to give parents a degree of reassurance that each school would take the matter seriously for pupils and consider whether any additional risk mitigations need to be put in place. Having engaged with the Public Health Agency, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and the CMO, our understanding is that that would apply only in the most exceptional cases. We are talking about perhaps 100 or 200 cases in the Province, because the fundamental position from the medical side is that schools are a safe place for our children. Therefore, we view the risk assessments as a means of communicating with parents on the mitigations that have been put in place and a means of reassuring parents and our workforce that the mitigations that we put in place have been agreed by the Department of Health, and we will ensure that, when those are put in place and operate effectively, schools are safe place to learn and work.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am willing to stand corrected, by my understanding is that, for extremely clinically vulnerable pupils, the 'New School Day' guidance advises that their return to school would be agreed in consultation with their GP or their consultant. Is that not the case?

Mr Murphy: Yes, it is. We expect parents to seek reassurance if a child has been at home for some period, and that reassurance comes from talking to their GP and/or their paediatrician, their oncologist or whoever else. In dealing with that, the Department of Health has been very clear and its advice to GPs and consultants is that additional risk mitigations for a child should be required only in the most exceptional cases. The basic principle is that, if a child is immunosuppressed or is receiving chemotherapy, they would not be at school normally, and we would not expect them to be at school today. However, if a child has asthma, any form of heart condition or a whole myriad of other things, if it was safe for them to be in school last March, it is safe for them to be in school today.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you know how that consultation process with GPs and consultants is going? Have you any examples of GPs or consultants having advised against a return to school or having advised on what mitigations may be needed for that return to school?

Mr Murphy: No. I have only heard anecdotal evidence at this point on GPs advising those pupils that they should maintain the normal position on hand hygiene, etc. I am not aware, as yet, of any guidance that states that any additional risk-mitigations should be put in place.

There may be cases in the area of transport where they have advised, for whatever reasons, that it is not ideal for a child to be going on a school bus. I understand that the EA is putting in arrangements to provide suitable home-to-school transport for those individuals. Again, we are talking about a small handful of the most clinically vulnerable children; we are not talking about the vast majority of people who may have shielded.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What action will you take to seek more than anecdotal feedback on how that process is or is not working for the 100 to 200 pupils in Northern Ireland that it affects?

Mr Dale Hanna (Education Authority): We know who those vulnerable children are. A range of multidisciplinary teams are working on how to get those children back into school. As Adrian pointed out, they have a broad range of conditions. There will, for example, be children who need aerosol-generating procedures, so we are working closely with our health colleagues and school teams to put in place arrangements for those children to return. That action is on the ground. We know who the children are, and we are working our way through that list.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The guidance states that a risk assessment should be conducted in the cases of pupils with extremely clinically vulnerable relatives. Who conducts that risk assessment?

Mr Hanna: The risk assessment would be conducted by the school and, if required, with support from EA officers and health colleagues.

Ms Michele Corkey (Education Authority): EA and DE staff have been working closely with the Public Health Agency and principals of special schools on all this information. That would be done on a cross-organisational, multidisciplinary approach. It would not be down to one person.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So it is not for just the principal to make that risk assessment?

Ms Corkey: No, because for children who are clinically very vulnerable, the GP does have a role, so all of that would have to be taken into account.

Mr Murphy: There is another category of pupils that fell into the shielding category, for example anybody with severe asthma, who would have attended a normal, mainstream school. That is for the head teacher to make an assessment.

Our guidance, and our engagement with the PHA, leads us to believe that a head teacher is quite suitable to do that. The head teacher will know the risk mitigations that have been put in place for their school, in terms of the procedures and systems for hand washing, hygiene, cleaning etc, and the operation of bubbles and protected segments.

Our understanding and our belief, certainly from our engagement with Health, is that those risk mitigations mean that schools are a safe place for pupils, whether or not they have been shielding.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What systems are in place to properly assess the capacity of schools to adhere to guidance, and, indeed, to implement guidance?

Ms Corkey: Principals, the EA, DE and the Public Health Agency are working together. We have carried out assessments on the requirements, and we are working through all those requirements to try to get schools operational as quickly as possible.

Mr Murphy: In the ideal system, we would want checks and balances and the ability to go to every school and check that they are adhering to them. The reality of the systems and processes is that they rely on human beings, who will cut corners and make mistakes etc. It is a managerial responsibility of principals and senior leadership teams to make sure that the public health actions, which are there to ensure that schools remain open, are operating and are complied with not in just week one but in week 20 and week 35 while this goes on. There is, clearly, a managerial task to make sure that this remains operational.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Department and the EA have the responsibility to ensure that adequate resources are available to schools so that they are able to implement the guidance with which you are providing them, yes?

Mr Murphy: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Have you assessed whether they have adequate resources to implement the guidance? Do we know how much funding is going to schools at this stage?

Mr Smith: You will be aware that, a couple of weeks ago, the Executive agreed an additional £41 million, approximately, for schools to cover the first term. The vast majority of that is to support schools in restarting. There is a smaller element for the provision of PPE and a small amount for free school meals. At the moment, our finance colleagues are working closely with the Education Authority and schools to see how best to deploy that money — particularly the £35 million — against a range of pressures that schools will face over the next few weeks. We will ensure that that money and those resources are available to schools as soon as possible and when they need it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have sent schools back, and you have given them high responsibilities around risk assessments, enhanced cleaning and sanitisation, as well as, perhaps, additional staffing responsibilities and blended learning, but not a penny has been received by any of those schools.

Mr Hanna: Perhaps I can add to that. The advice to schools is that they are required to allocate any costs associated with COVID to the COVID-19 cost centre. EA finance and local management of schools (LMS) colleagues have been advising schools that that is where they should collate all their costs associated with COVID-19. It is not that they are expending that money as it is currently; they have been asked to cost it to a particular cost centre. Then, we can work collectively across the system with DE finance colleagues to collate that at a higher level.

Mr Murphy: On that point, there is always a clamour for resources and capacity to do these things, to enable actions to be undertaken. Part of the reason that we want to be careful about all of this is that we do not want people to begin to operate protocols that are way in excess of what is actually needed. There is a degree of fear and anxiety in the general population and in our workforce around what is needed to keep our schools safe.

Fundamentally — it is a bit trite to say it — we are being led by the science and by what the PHA recommends about cleaning regimes for transport and in schools and the routines around that — cleaning post-COVID-19 confirmed cases, etc. One of the key costs that schools will clearly incur is around replacing staff, whether that is classroom staff, building supervisors or teachers who are being asked to self-isolate as we go through the management of the pandemic.

You can estimate that at this point. I have to confess to being an accountant by background, and I can put a number to that. It would make sense if I could justify the assumptions, but what it will bear out to me in reality is not clear. We need to be mindful that we are trying to manage things in a situation where resources are not the limiting factor; it is about looking to the appropriate clinical and scientific advice that we should be following.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Lastly and briefly, maternity leave is a specific issue. It is my understanding that, under scientific health advice, maternity leave should commence from 28 weeks. Does the Department of Education meet the additional costs of maternity leave pay? How, then, will it assist schools to meet the additional costs of substitute teacher cover?

Ms Corkey: Funding has been secured for substitute cover for schools. On maternity leave in particular, I am not an HR expert, so I cannot speak about the detail, but I know that funding has been secured for sub teachers and supporting schools during COVID.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is my understanding that the Department of Education meets the costs of paying a teacher during maternity leave. There may be an additional cost to that, if that is for a longer period. Will they continue to meet those costs?

Mr Murphy: The principle has not changed. The Department will still meet the costs of teachers' maternity leave. That is a principle that has been followed. If the definition of maternity leave is

changed to comply with the guidance, the Department and the EA will have to manage that cost. It is just one part of the many costs that are being incurred during the pandemic.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Finally, the funding has been designed to meet the first-term costs. When will schools receive that funding?

Ms Corkey: As soon as the mechanism is in place to provide it.

Mr Smith: As soon as possible, Chair. Schools are just back, and they will not be incurring major costs, at this stage. Their annual schools' delegated budget was confirmed to them some time ago, and, as Adrian and colleagues have said, we have money available. There is £41 million for the first term. We have never been through this kind of situation before. We have to work out how to deploy that money and where the pressure points are, and we are endeavouring to do that as quickly as possible so that schools have the resources available when they need them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What mechanism will be used for allocating the funding, John? Will it be the common funding scheme?

Mr Smith: I do not know the detail of that. We will need to come back to you on that.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for attending. I want to pick up on a few things that the Chair mentioned, as well as comments made by Adrian and John in relation to working our way through the situation. We know that, since June, the Minister and the Department have been working on the approach of full return for September. However, judging by the answers that we have heard today and what we heard from the unions previously, most children are back to school now, in the first week of September, but we still do not have clear answers, never mind clear guidance.

On 12 August or 14 August — I do not have the exact date — the Finance Minister agreed the budget, but we still do not know what mechanism will be used to allocate the funding or how much money schools are going to get. John, a post-primary school in my area has spent thousands of pounds on getting the school ready for the return of pupils and staff from August. The principal has done that on the basis that the money will be coming forward, but she does not yet know what that will look like. It is disappointing, this morning, to hear that there are still so many outstanding issues and concerns, and lack of involvement, or late involvement, of the unions. We have raised that with the Minister.

The Minister was here two weeks ago. I want to pick up on the risk assessments, an area in which there is conflicting information. I asked the Minister and I have written to him — I am still awaiting a response — about the children who are vulnerable on medical grounds and need a risk assessment. The Chair has, rightly, gone through a lot of the detail, but, as you said, Adrian, we knew who those children were in March. Can I get an answer today? It concerns a small number of children, as you and the Minister mentioned. He made it clear to us that a medical professional was going to carry out that assessment, and I have been advising parents, probably wrongly, at this stage, according to the advice that I was getting from the Minister. Has a risk assessment been carried out for each one of that small number of children, and are the resources, support and provision in place to ensure that they will all be back at school this week and not be left at home and left behind because they are not in place?

Mr Smith: Karen, I will chase the letter that you wrote to the Minister today and get back to you as soon as possible. On the guidance, we have been on this endeavour since before June with the practitioners group of 20 principals who represent all of the different phases and the different school types. We consulted with trade unions and managing authorities throughout that time. The guidance was written in agreement with the PHA. It is a framework. It is trying to strike a balance where no two schools are the same. School principals need a degree of autonomy to implement the guidance that is respective to their particular circumstances. When we issued the revised guidance on 13 August, the changes were relatively small. They were mainly to do with all schools coming back full time from 24 August.

Of course, issues will arise, now that schools are back. No guidance can be absolutely prescriptive to cover every single set of eventualities, and that is why we are still working with the PHA and we will continue to engage with school leaders, the practitioners group and trade unions to resolve them as quickly as we can. We acknowledge that schools are in a very difficult position and that they seek clarity. We are working on that as we go forward.

Ms Mullan: John, again, this is about a small number of children, who are known to the Education Authority. Has their assessment been carried out by the relevant medical professional, and has the provision been put in place for them to attend school without delay, if it is safe to do so?

Ms Corkey: From the week of 20 August, revised guidance came in on aerosol-generated procedures, so the Education Authority and the Department of Education have worked closely with the PHA, and we have drawn in the five health trusts to make sure that the most adequate guidance and support is there. We are supporting those school principals to make sure that all of those procedures are in place, and we are trying to get those children into school as quickly as possible, following those guidelines. It may be this week or it may be next week, but we are putting all resources that we have behind supporting that revised guidance.

Ms Mullan: Great, Michele. Thank you.

The Chair went through the issue of testing. Some teachers and parents have expressed concerns about distinguishing between the symptoms of COVID and those of the cold or flu. In going into the next period, can the Department advise whether the Minister is working with the Executive to bring forward a mass vaccination programme, to include teachers and parents, for the winter flu in 2020?

Mr Smith: A mass vaccination programme for flu?

Ms Mullan: Yes. For teachers and parents.

Mr Murphy: My understanding is that the Department of Health is working on a mass vaccination programme. That is a national programme throughout the UK, and Northern Ireland will follow part of that. I am afraid that I do not have the detail on what has been proposed. I suspect that Health officials are still working on that. However, that certainly will be extending the existing definition and the categories of people who will be eligible for flu vaccinations. Yes, we expect that to be rolled out. It is a normal public health duty. Schools will facilitate that by providing the lists of pupils and access for the Public Health Agency nurses and doctors to carry out that vaccination in line with normal public health vaccination programmes.

Ms Mullan: Thanks, Adrian. Earlier, you highlighted the different symptoms. I am asking for an information flyer or something to be produced by the Education Authority for schools and parents, showing the symptoms for the three different areas, distinguishing between them and advising what action should be taken. That follows on from the Chair's questioning around testing. It would be very useful because, as we know, we do not have time today to go over what to do. I ask that the Education Authority do that.

Mr Smith: I take your point, Karen. We are working on that at the moment. We want to avoid parents and schools being confused about when to distinguish between real COVID symptoms and ordinary coughs and sniffles and to give people clear guidance on the distinction between the two and, crucially, what they should do or not do, depending on what the symptoms are. Obviously, what we do not want is a similar situation to Scotland, where, over the last number of weeks, they have experienced a 300% rise in the number of young people seeking COVID-19 tests when, potentially, all they had was the common cold. Obviously, that has implications for PHA resources etc. I take the point: this is one of the things where you just need to put out some supplementary clear guidance, and that is what we are working on today.

Ms Mullan: John, I want to bring you on to transport. You may have heard the briefing that we had beforehand. I want to take you to page 42 of your 'New School Day' guidance. In section d, it talks about vehicle cleaning. I will read it out, because I know that I am pushing this, and you might not have it in front of you:

"The EA will work with transport operators to agree the arrangements for cleaning vehicles. Operators should maintain high hygiene standards for buses delivering home to school transport. This should include rigorous cleaning standards including frequent cleaning of high frequency touch points should be undertaken or other mitigating options put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19."

You can correct me if I am wrong, but I have been looking over this as we are sitting here and I do not see any guidance in relation to cleaning and safety on the Education Authority fleet. It was very

concerning to hear this morning from a bus driver and a member of the union that that is not the standard that is being carried out in the Education Authority fleet, yet we are asking it of the private operators. We have heard of bus drivers having to take buses back to schools that do not have hot water, and they have to clean them themselves; that the rigorous cleaning is not being carried out throughout the day; and, again, that cab screens are not in place. Again, we knew in June that we were coming back to full reopening. We knew that the fleet was sitting there. We knew that it needed to be ready, yet it was not ready and PPE was not in place.

That is very concerning. It is also very concerning in relation to the cleaning of schools. Just quickly on that point, because I know that other members will want to come in, Dale, can you answer some of the queries on the cleaning of school transport? Will the Education Authority have an oversight over schools in relation to what cleaning is being carried out, or is it very much being left to principals and school leaders?

On a final point — I will finish here — I find it so frustrating that a lot of these pressures have been put directly on principals. We have heard here today that they are responsible for all risk assessments of the school estate, the risk assessment of staff and the risk assessment of children with a vulnerability. That is just shocking on top of everything else. Dale, if you could pick up on both those questions on cleaning.

Mr Hanna: OK. I will try and pick up on as much of that as possible, and, if you need to come back to me if I forget something, that is fine. First, I was disappointed to hear the comments from Thomas, but I reassure you that we have suitable cleaning arrangements in place. The cleaning arrangements that we have in place have been agreed directly with the Public Health Agency. The arrangements are that the vehicle is cleaned at the end of the day, which is the normal arrangement. With the EA fleet, as part of the drivers' contractual duties, it is their job to clean the vehicle, and they have all the equipment to do that. They have also been required, within the road transport guidance, to clean the touch points on at least a twice-daily basis when possible. We have hand sanitisers fitted to the vehicles. All the drivers have been provided with masks, face shields, gloves, aprons and cleaning materials. Yes, over the last week, the pace of getting those out to drivers in different areas has been variable, but we have worked hard, and our services were open over the weekend to make sure that drivers could get them. Cleaning arrangements are in place.

It goes back to hand hygiene and washing. Obviously, children are being encouraged to use hand sanitiser when they get on and off a bus. Then, when they go into school, they are being encouraged to wash their hands. All that is in place to break the cycle of infection. The drivers are also being encouraged to use hand sanitiser, and they have access to that, as well as to the small pumps.

You mentioned a bit about hot water in some schools. Where those small individual cases are brought to our attention, we are dealing with them. I have probably forgotten something else that you asked, Karen. You can let me know if I have not covered everything.

Mr Murphy: Karen, may I come in on this point, if you do not mind? Cleaning is an issue because staff, parents and pupils all feel that that is one of the key measures to mitigate the risk of continued transmission, and, to a certain extent, it is. However, the key measure in making school safe is using hand sanitisers and hand-washing and not excluding but ensuring that children who have symptoms do not get on to school transport or public transport or get into school. Head teachers have been clear that they will send children who exhibit symptoms home. A bus driver is also free to say, "Don't get on my bus".

First, you do not allow individuals who have any symptoms into the school environment, and that is from the bus through to the playground through to the classroom. When a child goes into that environment, the key mitigation factor is that they are encouraged to use hand sanitiser, which is about 70%-odd successful in cleaning off the virus, and are then encouraged to go straight away to wash their hands before going on into school. That breaks the cycle and therefore reduces the risk in the school environment. It is like creating a ring of steel around it. If every parent, teacher and pupil does that, the risk in the school is extremely minimal, unless an individual is asymptomatic and has boarded a bus or got into school. Then there are mitigations put in place to reduce the transmission within schools, such as the segmentation of people into bubbles and reducing the amount of interaction.

You have to see it as an entire system. One individual measure will not be the answer to everything. The public health advice is very simple: normal cleaning protocols apply. Nothing special is used: no steam or fancy chemicals. The individuals who are doing it can wear routine PPE — rubber gloves, an

apron, a mask — that we would expect them to wear in the first place. When you do that in a normal school environment, you are at very negligible levels of risk. That is why we are keen to make sure that the point is that routine cleaning should happen, and it should happen anyway. This is not adding anything else. The key point is making sure that the entrance to the school and that ring of steel are protected by not allowing individuals in and by ensuring thorough hand-washing at the beginning of the school day.

Ms Mullan: The basics, such as the protective screens for bus drivers and all that, need to be there first. In your guidance, you ask private operators for "high hygiene standards" and "rigorous cleaning". That conflicts with what you have said about normal cleaning being OK for the Education Authority fleet. I do not want to get caught up in it here. I know Dale, and I know that he will go away and ensure that whatever needs to be done will be done. We need to hear from the Education Authority about what oversight of cleaning is going to be provided to schools. I know you said that they should come forward to let you know what they need, but we need to ensure that the standards and resources are there.

Mr Hanna: Karen, can I come back first? I know that you asked about screens in buses, and you have just reminded me of that. We did risk assessments, and we spoke to the Public Health Agency, which advised that the Education Authority fleet did not require screens. However, we consulted trade union colleagues and shared the risk assessment with them. During that process, they indicated that their members were concerned and that they would like the screens fitted; they felt that they would provide further protection. On that basis, we took the decision to fit the screens. Those screens are being fitted over and above what our risk assessments require us to do. I want to reassure the Committee that risk assessments were shared with trade unions and we consulted them on that matter.

The Education Authority is responsible for the cleaning of about 390 or 400 schools across the Province. Obviously, the rest of the schools are responsible for their own cleaning. We work closely with the schools that we clean. As part of the dedicated principals' helpline, there is an option to speak to our cleaning service. If any school has concerns about cleaning, it can contact us. We are also available to go into schools and provide enhanced cleans where there has been a confirmed case of COVID-19. We are there to support the schools as much as is practically possible, and we have the protocols and arrangements in place to do that.

Mr Humphrey: Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for your attendance. I thank the Minister, the Department and EA officials for all their hard work and commitment during COVID, which has provided difficult and unique circumstances that, obviously, no one has had to operate in before. I pay tribute to everyone involved, in both the Department and the EA. I also thank those involved in the summer schemes, which were very beneficial for our young people and particularly acute in light of their absence from the classroom since March. Thank you all very much.

I do not know whether you have had the opportunity to listen to the evidence that was given to the Committee by the various trade union representatives. Some of it was concerning, so now is your opportunity to provide some clarification to the Committee, the general public and, in particular, the principals, staff and pupils of schools. I start with part of the evidence from Mr Alan Law of NIPSA, who talked about the four Chief Medical Officers' letters. He said that he does not believe that the arrangements for the school estate in Northern Ireland as set out in those letters, including, obviously, the one from our own Chief Medical Officer, Dr McBride, are in place or exist. Can someone respond to that, please?

Mr Murphy: The guidance was drawn up by DE officials and shared with the PHA, the Chief Medical Officer and the medical team in the Department of Health. They confirmed that the range of mitigations that we proposed, which are broadly similar to what is in operation in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, mean that schools are a safe environment, which is the basis of the four CMOs' letters.

Mr Humphrey: So you contend that the arrangements are in place?

Mr Murphy: The guidance has been provided, and the schools are operating it. We can never be 100% sure that every school is operating to a 100% level of effectiveness, but the Chief Medical Officer's assessment of the guidance that we provided is based on compliance with it, and compliance will ensure an environment that is safe for our parents, our pupils and our education workforce.

Mr Humphrey: As I think I said earlier, the communication and dissemination of information is crucial in the current climate in which everyone is having to operate to fend off this horrible disease. The issue about the Public Health Agency is not the direct remit of this Committee, but I earlier proposed that the Committee write to the PHA to suggest that a trade union official be asked to sit on that group. It seems to me self-evident that, if the practitioners are having to carry those things out, it is important that the voice of the people who will have to do that work on the ground and at the coalface, as it were, is heard. Further to that, Dale, if I may turn to you and to the evidence given by Mr McMichael about transport, I listened to your previous answer about consultation. Very clearly, Mr McMichael was saying that drivers — and trade union officials, I suppose he was referring to — had attended meetings, but not had true consultation, which was how he put it. Can you reassure this Committee again that the views of drivers and trade union officials around transportation are actually being listened to? I listened really intently and closely to your last answer, but reassurance would be helpful because he said that the EA plans were, and I quote:

"ill thought out, and no input had been sought from those who do the job".

Mr Hanna: You broke up in the last couple of seconds of that, but I am happy to provide that reassurance. I reiterate that, when we conducted our original risk assessment, which was used to help draw up the guidance, it was shared with the trade union mechanism that is formally in place. The trade unions gave feedback. Part of their concern was, as I have said, about the screens, and we responded and reacted to that. We have had ongoing engagement with the trade unions. We had two meetings with the trade unions last week about transport, and we agreed a series of further mitigations and actions as part of that. We appreciate that our staff are anxious about various aspects of this. I can also confirm that we are scheduled to meet the trade unions tomorrow on transport issues. We are hopeful that that meeting will address and action out many of the things that we have agreed to do. I hope that that is sufficient reassurance on that matter.

Mr Humphrey: That is important to hear, and I thank you for that clarification. As a governor in two schools, I am concerned when I hear trade unions — one of your employees; a driver of one of your buses — saying that they are not being listened to, that it is ill-thought-out and that no input is being sought. You can understand our position as MLAs, as constituency Members and, for many of us, as school governors. The previous set of interviewees have given us information which is at variance from what we have just heard from you. Communication and clarification are needed around all these things. We need everybody to be on the same page so that the message going out is not being confused, because in the space of a couple of hours we have heard vastly different evidence both from the trade unions and, now, yourselves.

Earlier, I suggested that your fleet is of a certain size and that most of the Education Authority buses are used in rural areas. Not many of them will be used by the major schools in Belfast for the transportation of children to school, which is mainly done by Translink or private operators. Is there more that can be done between yourselves and Translink, given that, in the current environment, it will have much more resource and experience in the cleaning of buses and all of that? Is there some synergy? Have you been talking to Translink, or have you plans to talk to it, about how you can share your experiences and provide a standard across both fleets?

Mr Hanna: Absolutely, William. First, just to reassure you, we have been meeting Translink every week about getting the school transport network up and running for the start of the new school year. Translink has worked really hard with us on that, and we have a really strong and close relationship. We operate two very different fleets, and we have a slightly different cleansing regime. Their vehicles operate on a more — I will not say 24/7 basis but certainly a more intense basis than the Education Authority fleet, so we have approached that in slightly different ways. Yes, the teams are working together and, where there are opportunities to avail ourselves of resources either way, we will certainly do that if we can.

Mr Humphrey: Finally, how often do you meet the Public Health Agency and the Chief Medical Officer's office? Mention was made earlier that regular meetings are being held, which I am pleased to hear. It is important that this Department, in particular, listens to the advice of the professionals on the safe reopening of schools, namely the Chief Medical Officer, the Public Health Agency and so on. How often are you meeting? Can you provide some reassurance on that to the employees of the school estate, right across teaching and non-teaching staff, and to parents who send their children to school this week, some of them for the first time?

Mr Smith: Chair, I can deal with that. William, we have been working with the CMO's office and the PHA at senior level, and through the organisation, for months now. I return to the point Adrian made earlier. The first and second iterations of the New School Day guidance were not produced in isolation in Rathgael House. They were informed by the scientific evidence produced by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which is the UK Government's overarching advisory body in that regard, and by guidance that the Department for Education put out for England. We quality-reviewed and assessed that with the Chief Medical Officer and his teams and the PHA. That is just to reassure Committee members as to the provenance of our guidance, if you like.

We are acutely aware that when schools come back, as they did last week and this week, issues and circumstances will arise that could not have been foreseen in the guidance, because the guidance is a high-level framework. It goes down to a certain level of detail. To make sure that we can respond rapidly to operational matters, we now meet the CMO, the deputy CMOs and senior officials in the PHA twice a week. That involves me and senior colleagues in DE and in the Education Authority. That happens twice a week just to keep a strategic view on how things are going, particularly in these early weeks.

Underneath all that, a group of colleagues within the Department and the EA are working at a more operational level with the PHA and the track-and-trace teams to resolve any technical or operational points. We are putting significant resource into that for the next few weeks, because we recognise that this is a critical time for schools and parents. I just wanted to *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Humphrey: I appreciate that. Thank you very much. I am pleased that those meetings are happening and that that information is being shared. The communication and dissemination of that to schools, parents, governors and the media is hugely important so that everyone is absolutely clear. The Department, the EA, the schools and the entire community should be reassured that everyone is on the same page with regard to that information.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel? Is he on mute? Daniel, are you on mute? Can we check that Assembly Broadcasting has added Daniel to the spotlight? I will bring in Robbie Butler, and we will come back to Daniel immediately thereafter, once we have him linked in.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, guys, for joining us today again. I want to pick up on something that William Humphrey talked about, because it is really important. When we look at the purpose of school and its added importance at the moment with COVID, pupils need to be at the centre of the conversation. Confidence needs to be built with parents, teachers and so on, but that consultation piece needs to be bottomed out. Going back to my days as a union official in the Fire Service, sometimes the difference between a consultation and a meeting was very grey. Sometimes, the employer used a meeting as a form of consultation when it was not. Sometimes, as union officials, we fudged the issue of what that was. The responsibility lies not just with the Department but with the rep bodies too. There needs to be a real, grown-up conversation with regard to that consultation, and it needs to be nailed down so that, when those conversations happen, they are marked as a consultation and not just as a meeting. That is not acceptable in terms of building confidence.

Pupils, parents and teachers are genuinely concerned and anxious. We are all facing in the same direction, and this is starting to really frustrate and anger me. In each of these meetings that we have, it is the same tone and manner. I understand that new information is coming at us fast and frantic, but we are all facing in the same direction. I am really quite mystified as to why we cannot tie down what a consultation actually is and have those defined periods, even if they are short periods. They need to be bracketed, so I would suggest that, whether it is the rep bodies or the other agencies that are involved, that is what we need to do.

I read a piece on the dissemination of well-being advice in the guidance that was provided. You launched the well-being guidance for schools on 17 August. That is absolutely brilliant, and we have been pushing that, obviously. However, there is a wee bit in there that I need some clarity on. The guidance talks about a nurturing approach, but it has come to my attention that the EA nurture team has been disbanded. I do not know whether that is absolutely true, but if we are moving from a period of uncertainty and COVID issues that are compounding the existing mental health and emotional well-being problems that we have, I would like confirmation that the nurture team has not been disbanded. Can you give me a sitrep on that at the moment, please?

Ms Corkey: I am happy to take that. As you said, the COVID crisis threw us all into helping and supporting everybody as best we can, but at no time was the nurture team disbanded. As the Restart

programme started in April and the well-being strategy was being devised, the nurture team was central to that strand of work. It has been providing the guidance and has had a huge input into all of the documents that are available. It is that nurture element that is crucial in these opening days of school. There may be some truth in that perhaps, for some weeks, the team was diverted to other areas, but it certainly has never been disbanded. Since the well-being strategy has become such a focus, the nurture team has been central to all of the guidance that is being produced.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that answer. Some schools have been in the process of having a nurture centre or hub put in place but have not achieved that yet. Is that maybe just a delay, then? If there was a promissory note, will it still be forthcoming?

Ms Corkey: I would assume so. Business as usual, as you know, has been paused, so perhaps that work has been paused. I cannot say that with certainty; it is not my department. However, I can say that the value and importance of the nurture units moving forward will certainly make them a big priority.

Mr Butler: OK, thank you. There were some discussions with the teaching representative bodies, and an announcement was made about helplines for principals and teachers. Can we get an update today as to whether those helplines are live? Also, given the fact that our teachers and heads work nine to five, will the helplines be available after hours or out of hours?

Mr Hanna: Robbie, I can take that. We have had an emergency operation helpline centre operating since the start of COVID, and that has continued throughout. About three weeks ago, we stood that up to operate, so it is operating on a nine-to-five basis but it has access to out-of-hours support if required from senior Education Authority officers. That is monitored out of hours and at the weekend, and I can confirm that it is in place.

Mr Butler: Dale, can you outline where to get the contact information for the out-of-hours contact so that anybody who is not aware of that can access it?

Mr Hanna: The telephone number of the helpline has been circulated to principals. When they phone through, they have a number of options. Between the opening hours of 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, they can avail themselves of six or seven options. After 5.00 pm, they will hear a standard message that asks them to send an email to a mailbox. That is monitored regularly, and a senior officer will get back to them.

Mr Butler: The helpline is brilliant and will provide a lifeline to many principals, but I am pretty sure that, between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm Monday to Friday, most of our principals will be doing a lot of firefighting, if I can use that analogy, especially at the moment. They have to deal with the complexity of running their schools, the raging inferno that is COVID, the risk assessments and the continual hyper-vigilance of all that is going on in schools with children coming in and going out, one-way systems and all of those things. Is there any capacity or likelihood that the hours might be changed to something more flexible to suit our principals? Does it have to be nine to five? I want to be fair to the people who are providing the helpline, but could they be available at different times?

Mr Hanna: It does not have to be nine to five; it can absolutely be something else, if we believe that that is what is required. Over the last two weeks, we have found that that has worked well, so, from an EA helpline perspective, we do not believe that the evidence suggests that we need to extend it to later in the evenings or to the weekends. However, should circumstances evolve so that we feel that we need to move that to different operating times, we have an alternative model that we could put in place at the hit of a switch. That is there, but I reassure you that, at this stage, we do not feel that we need to extend the opening hours and that the arrangements that we have in place are sufficient to support schools.

Mr Butler: I will maybe raise that with you at another time if things change. Obviously, it is an evolving situation.

Can you outline how schools access the COVID centre funding for extra cleaning, extra hygiene and staffing resources? Is it a simple process of bidding for the money from the COVID centre? Has it been done yet? Are teachers involved in bidding for that extra money? How simple is the system?

Mr Hanna: Robbie, in broad terms, we have worked with the operational teams, EA finance colleagues and DE finance colleagues to build up a pressure bid of what we thought that might look like. We had to estimate what additional cleaning materials, hours and PPE would be required, and we pulled that all together. As colleagues have mentioned, we have a very high-level global figure of what that looks like across the system. How those funds will be disseminated across the school settings and categories, which are obviously different, still has to be worked out between DE colleagues and EA finance colleagues.

Mr Butler: I think that the Chair asked a question earlier, and I think that the answer was "As soon as possible". This is probably the same question. Can you give me an idea of what "As soon as possible" might mean? Some schools are operating in serious deficits already from previous years, and they need the confidence that they will not go into further deficit and have to try to pay that money back. Is it a separate system that will allow them to avail themselves of that money and not complicate their financial structures?

Mr Hanna: Obviously, it will depend on the category of school. For example, cash flow issues are not the same in the controlled sector. From what I understand, colleagues are working to get that done as soon as possible. I do not want to guess or speculate, but I assume that it will be a short period of weeks to get that done.

Mr Butler: This is my final question; I will then allow the Chair to move on to the next member. I understand the points about the guidance and the planning, and you have rightly said that you have consulted the CMO, the Chief Scientific Adviser and all those experts. I have a real interest in the risk assessment part of it. I know that you have answered in some way about the indemnity aspect, but who designed the generic risk assessments? Where did they come from? Do you genuinely think that they are fit for the purpose of COVID? I have had a look at them, and, while I have not seen any glaring omissions, I want to get some confidence that they are useful for the purpose for which they have been put in. They look very generic, to be fair. That might be fine, but was any expert guidance sought on the effectiveness of the risk-assessment model used? I have a genuine fear for the principals around the complexity of having to carry out the risk assessments and the need for the robustness of the methodology to be as absolute as it can be.

Mr Hanna: OK. I will try to pick that up for you.

The risk assessments were devised primarily using health and safety support from the Education Authority. It was done through feedback and consultation with the practitioners' group. As referenced earlier, there were about 20 principals involved in that from a range of schools. It was also supported internally by the Education Authority's school development service. Significant time was spent developing those risk assessments across the various categories of schools and sectors to make sure that they were as fit for purpose as possible.

Robbie, to give you additional reassurance, one of the dedicated helplines that principals can access relates to risk assessments. The Education Authority's health and safety team are there to support, help and reassure principals in the completion of risk assessments or to provide reassurance on a completed one.

Mr Butler: This does not really require an answer. I am just going to ask that you monitor, review and improve the risk assessment on an ongoing basis. You probably are doing so, and forgive me, I am not being cheeky. I just believe that, in the dispensation that we are in, the need to constantly review the appropriateness and the effectiveness of what we are doing is as important as anything. I accept that you are working in uncharted waters, as are we, and we need to be as agile as we can be to make sure that everything is as up to date and as professionally accredited as it can be.

Mr McCrossan: Chair, can you hear me now?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you to the directors of the EA and to John from the Department of Education for their presentations.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the immense work done by teaching and non-teaching staff throughout our schools and the pressure that has been placed on them throughout a very

challenging time. There is no doubt that a huge amount of preparatory work has been carried out across the Department of Education and the EA.

That being said, there are, however, huge issues, and it remains very clear, even throughout this morning's presentation, that there are considerable uncertainties about the process to ensure that schools are protected and that they are properly resourced and financed where necessary. Some of the contributions, particularly on funding, worry me. To hear a number of phrases like, "It may be", "I think it could be" and, "As soon as possible" tell me one simple thing, and again reaffirm the concern of teachers and principals that there is no certainty when it comes to funding.

There were comments made by Adrian at the start — and not to in any way misquote him — that the funding will be allocated almost based on need. What happens where there is an outbreak in a school and that school has reached out for the necessary funding, resources, PPE, cleaning materials or anything like that? What happens in that situation when the school has not had the necessary funding? The other thing that we have to remember is that schools are now back. They have had to put things in place, in very large and small schools, without any extra resources or funding whatsoever. I am very concerned that, even as we sit here today, after six months of schools being closed, there are considerable unanswered questions, some of the most fundamental and simple questions, that have been posed not only by teachers, staff and principals but also by unions, parents and politicians.

I need some certainty, particularly from John, on the comment made about the mechanism. When is this going to be in place, and when are schools actually going to see money? I do not want to hear, "We will ensure that a school will get it when and if they need it". They should have the extra resources there. Principals are expected to step up the plate — they always have and always will — but in this pandemic, our teaching workforce, principals and non-teaching staff, have been taken for granted by the Department of Education and the Education Authority on this basis. If we trust them with everything else, let us trust them with the budget for the school to ensure that they can safeguard staff and pupils.

Mr Smith: The facts are that the Executive agreed an extra £42 million for Education a couple of weeks ago. That is absolutely certain.

In terms of the precise mechanism for getting that money out to schools or whether it is held in schools, there might be certain items that are paid for by the EA, and schools simply order them down so that there is no actual cost to the schools. I would not like to speculate on that. What I can say is that we want to make sure that there are no impediments to schools getting what they need to get up and running properly. I will go back to our finance colleagues, and we will get back to you with some clarity as soon as possible. I do not know the precise mechanisms for that. The accountants are working it through, but we will come back to you quickly with some clarity. That is all I can say on that.

In terms of the provision of PPE, cleaning materials, hand sanitiser etc — Dale will know more about this than me — there are stocks in place, and helplines in place. Schools know exactly what they need to do to get those materials delivered and how they need to be ordered. There should not be any school today that does not have what it needs in cleaning materials, hand sanitiser and PPE. Would that be right?

Mr Hanna: That is absolutely right, John.

Just to reassure you, Daniel, there are two bits to that. The first is about sourcing supplies. I have written to schools four times in the past four to five weeks to remind them how they can order supplies. Our teams have worked hard to put the supply chain in place so that there are sufficient supplies to meet the estimated needs across the education system.

As a backup, the EA has an emergency distribution centre. We have been operating that over the past three weekends so that, if any school, in advance of its opening date, felt that it did not have sufficient supplies or an order had not been delivered on time, we provided them with emergency stock.

John said that finance colleagues would come back with clarity. In at least two of those letters that I wrote to principals, I said that the funding had been secured at the level that John alluded to. We said that further information would be provided on how that funding would be distributed across the system.

Mr McCrossan: Yes, but the big concern that I have in relation to a lot of this is about the uncertainty. This is directed more towards John, as the deputy permanent secretary for the Department of Education. Being direct about it, John, it is absolutely disgraceful that we are in a situation where schools have returned and you cannot provide me with an answer to the financial questions that I pose. To come to this Committee today without the answers, when you probably should have assumed that we would ask questions in relation to this, is not appropriate. Teachers and principals are knocking our doors down, as are unions and others, asking those questions. The questions are not new to the Department or to the Education Authority for that matter, and I am finding it extremely frustrating that we cannot even answer these questions. To say that we will be back in, maybe, a week or two weeks' time is still not acceptable. As I said, many of these preparations should have been made over the six months. I appreciate that funding has been allocated in only the past number of weeks, but surely this should have been resolved at this stage.

Even when we break down the £7 million among the £41 million — I think that one of the union representatives said this morning — that works out at £34 per day. That is £170 per week by a rough calculation. How will that deal with schools the size of Holy Cross College in Strabane? Let us be realistic, this is about money. I appreciate that there are financial pressures for the Department of Education, particularly at the Executive, and you can get only what you bid for, but a lot of this holding back of money is just because it is not readily available. It is not about what the PHA has advised, and it is certainly not about the scientific or medical advice. It is a matter of fact that there is just not the money to meet some of the real and serious concerns of teachers and principals in schools. Yes, £41 million is a lot of money, but it is not going to scratch the surface in the long term in relation to this. I am really frustrated that there are no answers to some of these questions, John. As deputy permanent secretary, you should have been here today. Other members have also expressed frustration in relation to that.

Mr Smith: Point taken, Daniel. Let me reassure you that we are not in the business of holding back money. In respect of the £7 million that someone referred to earlier, I am not sure about that. It is not a figure that I am familiar with. Some £6.5 million is allocated for PPE. I do not know whether that is what was intended by the previous witness, but it is for stocks of PPE, including materials.

Mr McCrossan: That is what the union representative referred to. Is it sufficient to ensure that schools are fully equipped? It is £34 a day for a school like Holy Cross College.

Mr Murphy: Daniel, can I come in on that? I am not going to deal with the costing side of that, but it comes back to the expectations/aspirations of teachers and the workforce, in comparison to what is in the guidance. PPE is required only in very exceptional circumstances. The public health guidance is very clear about that. PPE should only be used in circumstances where PPE would have been used in the past. If you were in a nursery school, changing a child's nappy, you would normally have been expected to wear gloves and an apron, and you are expected to do that now. There is no difference in the requirement for PPE today in schools, beyond the particular circumstances of aerosol-generating procedures, which was alluded to earlier.

The additional cost incurred by schools is taken as a precautionary measure to reassure staff. It is not in the public health guidance.

Mr McCrossan: Yes. Just on that point —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, before you start again, OK —

Mr Murphy: On the second point, —. Sorry. All right?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, go ahead. I will come in after you, thanks.

Mr Murphy: I am just going to make a second point. I reiterate that £6.5 million is the best estimate that anybody can provide as to what it will cost to provide PPE in those circumstances. It is based on the latest costs that have been ascertained from the supply chain, from the EA's position and from an estimate of PPE usage. I am quite certain that it is a very cautious one, and I am also certain that it is only for the first term.

As an accountant, I could draw up an estimate, and I could make it £2 million or £10 million. Part of the issue here is that we do not know what will be incurred until we allow schools to operate

effectively. The guidance is there to say when and where PPE should be worn and, to that extent, schools should be able to access it and use it as they need to. That is not to say that money will follow, or a blank cheque, but the processes will be there to make sure that the money, as required, meets those additional costs.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that, consistently in our Committee, there are a number of questions to be asked, but, if members wish to ask a number of questions, we have to try hard to make sure that we ask concise questions and do not give long commentaries. I will give you a brief supplementary, and I ask everyone, myself included, to stick to concise questioning where we have a number of questions that we need to ask. Thanks, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: I wish to come back to a point that was raised earlier in relation to vulnerable children. Many vulnerable children will be staying at home during this period. What has DE and the EA in place for supporting children who cannot attend school? Stranmillis pointed out, for instance, that, to date, very few teachers had engaged in live sessions, mainly due to poor access, reliability issues and limited teacher knowledge about how to design online lessons. What support mechanisms have DE and EA in place for vulnerable children who cannot attend schools?

Ms Corkey: We are working closely with our school principals. When we define that cohort, Daniel, we will make sure that a blended approach is used. Obviously, we need to have a range of resources available to those clinically vulnerable children. That is part of our well-being strategy and some of the responses that we will be developing through it and our education other than in school (EOTAS) provision.

Mr McCrossan: How many children are affected?

Ms Corkey: I do not have that figure in front of me, Daniel. I am sorry: I cannot answer that question.

Mr McCrossan: Are we anywhere near getting that figure? Surely that should be a priority for the EA.

Ms Corkey: You are absolutely right. We are working through the operations of that with our special school principals, the PHA and the health trusts. When we have all of the resources in place that we would hope to have in place and are able to find out the figure, we will be quite willing to share it, but I do not have it at the moment.

Mr McCrossan: Do you know how many school staff are still shielding? The report by the National Education Union (NEU) estimated that the figure could be as high as 40%.

Ms Corkey: We are carrying out a survey with school principals, and that data is coming in, but not all of the schools are fully functioning. So, when all of the schools are back, by the end of this week, we will be in a better position to clarify the number. Every day, we lift the data from schools on student attendance and staff attendance, and we are working our way through that.

Mr McCrossan: I have a brief final point, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr McCrossan: Stranmillis University College, in its report, also recommended that schools be provided with training on trauma recognition in order to support the return of children to schools. Have DE or EA arranged for that to happen?

Ms Corkey: Yes, Daniel. All of the resources in the well-being strategy are based on trauma-informed practice. So, all of those webinars, which were oversubscribed and which we are running again and trying to make available all of the time, are immersed in trauma-informed practice. So, yes, all of that is in the documentation and resources provided to schools.

Mr McCrossan: OK, thank you very much. Chair, just give me one last point: it will be brief.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Very brief; go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: John, it is in relation to the transfer test. This morning, it was announced that the transfer test has been postponed until January 2021. Had the Department already started making arrangements in relation to that, or has it only been doing so since this morning's High Court challenge?

Mr Smith: Daniel, I am not aware of that. I have been listening to the Committee all morning, so that information has not reached me.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, I might come back on that one, if you forgive me for moving us on. You raised an important question about blended learning. There are already pupils who are not attending school and are in need of blended learning, so I am extremely uncomfortable with the idea that we will wait to assess what that cohort looks like. There are already pupils who are not attending school and are in need of blended learning. What assistance is being provided to schools? What monitoring of those situations is happening to ensure that those pupils are receiving remote learning, some of whom may be in years 7, 12 and 14?

Ms Corkey: Sorry, Chris, I missed the start of that: are we talking about clinically vulnerable children or all children?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Any type of children. We know that there are pupils who are not attending school but should be. What assistance and oversight are the Department and Education Authority providing to ensure that those pupils receive blended learning at home?

Ms Corkey: First of all, there has been the device provision for schools; we are trying to get as many devices out to young people as possible. Secondly, there has been investment in Wi-Fi and Mi-Fi to give children connectivity on a wider scale. Thirdly, there is the access to the virtual learning packs for primary 6 children who were moving into primary 7, and 164 schools have applied for that. We know that that work is going on. I have figures here, from yesterday, on C2k and online provision. Collaborative platforms are still being used, and schools are still providing support for young people who are at home, particularly when they know that they are not returning to school.

My response to Daniel was about children who are clinically vulnerable. Schools are monitoring the work that is going out and are being supported by their cross-organisational link officers, but only when schools are back and established will we be able to determine how we will engage in learning recovery.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That will be a fairly rapid exercise though, because every day, every week, there will be lapses when a child has not accessed the degree of learning that you would wish them to access. That is a concern for you, I presume.

Ms Corkey: You are absolutely right.

Mr Smith: In the 'New School Day' guidance, as well as the support that Michelle just outlined, we expect schools to put systems and arrangements in place for when pupils are not at school, because some will be required to self-isolate if there is a suspected COVID outbreak in their household. Whilst they might be perfectly fit and well, they will not be at school for a number of days, and schools will need to be in a position to continue their tuition remotely. Obviously, the roll-out of the laptops and the Mi-Fi will help to deliver that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is another one to add to the expectation on the school list that you are massing up rightly, John. We need to ensure that the resources are in place to help them.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks everyone for meeting us today. It was mentioned in earlier contributions that there was a COVID cost centre in place for schools to claim back COVID costs. It has been brought to my attention during this meeting that school principals are not aware of that. Why has that not been clearly communicated to principals?

Mr Hanna: I am unable to answer that, Catherine. My understanding was that it had.

Mr Smith: We can look into that, Catherine. As Dale said, as far as we are concerned, schools know about the cost centre. We would need to find out what is going on there.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks. It is important that schools have clear direction and guidance on the likes of the COVID cost centre, especially at the minute when we know that they are under considerable pressure financially and with everything else that the restart has brought with it.

School leaders believe that the major costs, going forward, will probably be staffing. Can those be claimed back through the COVID cost centre?

Ms Corkey: Yes. A successful bid was made for money for substitute cover, so schools will be supported in that area.

Mr Smith: That is part of the £35 million package. That includes substitute teacher cover.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks for that. Moving on, in relation to transport, the special school guidance issued in June mentioned that specific transport guidance was being drawn up for special schools. I have not been able to find it online; my apologies if I have overlooked it. Was it issued and did special schools receive it?

Mr Hanna: The guidance relates more to those providing the transport; it is not necessarily for the schools. However, we have guidance out there. In the transport guidance, particular elements relate to children who have a special transport need. We have heard from other sources that they would prefer that that were separated out, so we are working on that to develop a specific, bespoke piece. It will not be anything new — it is already there — but we will just pull it together into one place.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks for that, Dale. That is important, because it is something that the Committee raised from the beginning. We cannot just add on special schools in guidance to mainstream schools. There are many different, more complex issues that need to be taken into consideration.

Lastly and, probably, more for you, John, in relation to childcare, NICMA and the childminders' branch of Unite have presented the Minister with a detailed evidence-based assessment of the financial difficulties faced by childminders as a result of COVID. With children now back at school and cases on the rise, some childminders have to close their doors for 14 days. When will the Minister or departmental officials meet with NICMA and Unite to negotiate a fair settlement that takes into account possible loss of earnings in the weeks and months ahead?

Mr Smith: Yes, Catherine, I am aware of the representations about that, and they have been asked to present, for want of a better phrase, business case-type evidence. I think that that is still being considered. I do not have any details on what the next steps will be, but we can come back to you on that. I think that it is in everyone's interests to get that resolved one way or the other as soon as possible.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, John.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much for your presentation. It has been very interesting so far. I have a couple of questions. On transport, is financial support available for private coach operators carrying children to and from school? If not, can this be investigated?

Regarding testing, is it possible for schools to avail themselves of mobile testing units that can visit them? Recently, I took part in mobile testing in relation to a sporting event that was taking place a few days later. The test was brought to the venue. Would such a mobile unit be available to visit schools to test pupils should someone present a positive test for COVID-19? Are schools closely monitoring attendance and the use of test and trace to isolate cases? Is this test, trace and protect strategy in place and operational? Following on from that, if there were a localised spike at a school, would that indicate a return to a blended learning approach or the closure of a school? Is the Department prepared, if the circumstances were to arise, to close some or all schools, as happened in March, with all of the complications that arose during that initial shutdown? As I asked before, are schools closely monitoring attendance and the use of test and trace to try to eradicate any chance of a COVID-19 outbreak in a school?

Mr Hanna: I will pick up on the first part, Maurice, on transport. The private coach and taxi operators were the first group of contractors that we were able to support through the supplier relief scheme, so all of those who are contracted with us have had access to that relief since COVID kicked in, in March this year. As far as any additional costs are concerned, where new contracts have gone out, suppliers

have been able to bid for additional money through their normal tendering mechanism for additional costs associated with operating runs for the rest of the year. Obviously, should there be anything exceptional outwith that, they can come to the Education Authority and speak to us about that on an individual case basis. They have had supplier relief since March.

Mr Smith: On test and trace, Maurice, when there is an outbreak in a school, the PHA operation, through its contact-tracing service, kicks in. There will be a conversation between the contact-tracing service and the school principal to ascertain what the circumstances are around that incidence, how many pupils are involved and what the location is. As part of that conversation, advice will be given to help the school to deal with that. As Adrian said earlier, one of the key arrangements that we have asked schools to put in place is segmenting of pupils into discrete bubbles where possible, particularly in primary school and years 8 to 10 in secondary school; it is more tricky in years 11 to 14. The benefit of having this segmentation is that, when there has been a COVID incident in a school, the school will know, as far as it can, exactly who the pupil or pupils have been in contact with and where, and that helps the contact-tracing service do its job more efficiently. So, there are processes in place in schools to establish the segments and bubbles, which will inform the PHA in its work.

Mr Murphy: Maurice, your question was about whether schools would have to close as a result of an outbreak. PHA advice on that is that that is quite unlikely unless it is a very, very, very significant outbreak. The ability to segment means that you can protect the rest of the school population from those limited numbers that are coming in. We have seen that in Scotland, where there have been one or two school closures as part of a wider community transmission in the area. The PHA will know not just how many pupils have been involved in any incident in a particular town, for example, but how many other people are testing, and it will make its judgement based on that. Schools are not sacrosanct when it comes to closures, but it is highly unlikely that they would be closed.

Mr M Bradley: OK, thanks very much.

Mr McNulty: Thank you John, Adrian, Michele and Dale. I appreciate that an enormous effort has been made over the last number of months to realign education and evolve in response to that. However, it is sad that we had union representatives here this morning who said that the information is unclear, ambiguous and open to interpretation. Six months into the pandemic, it is sad that that situation still remains. John, what do you consider to constitute meaningful consultation with the trade unions?

Mr Smith: Well, Justin, as I said before, we established those structures back at the beginning of lockdown, in May and June, and they were twofold; one with the practitioners' group — 20 principals from across Northern Ireland covering all different phases — and another group to engage with the trade union side and managing authorities. They have been involved regularly throughout. The guidance was done in co-design with the school practitioners, and we shared it for views, comments and input from the trade union side.

Admittedly, when we put out the latest version back in August, that was done at pace. We had to get guidance done, and the space that we had for that amount of consultation was very limited. The trade union side knew that in advance. However, as I said, we are not at the end of the process. As we go through and we revise our guidance as issues crop up, we will resurrect those structures to make sure that we hear the concerns. That is what we are doing in the Department. We have heard from Dale and Michele about the ongoing consultation that they have had, particularly on transport and issues like that. That dialogue will continue as we go forward. We are all on the same page. We want schools to return in the safest possible way that is safe for pupils and people who work in and around schools. We are all doing our very best to bring that about.

Mr McNulty: Thank you. It is very important that that consultation is elevated as we go forward, John. Teachers, principals and school staff — caterers, cleaners, groundsmen and bus drivers — all deserve enormous credit, given the level of uncertainty and given that they still feel fearful, for putting their best foot forward for the sake of the children and young people. They should all be applauded for that.

What are your views on the flu vaccination for year 8 pupils? Do you believe that that should be extended to staff and other year groups?

Mr Smith: Well, I am not a clinician, Justin. I am outside my sphere of competence when it comes to the efficacy of flu vaccines and who they should be given to. I would defer to the PHA on that one, to be honest.

Mr McNulty: Maybe it is not logical to give it to one year group and not to staff. Surely there is a strong rationale for giving it to the whole school body.

Mr Murphy: May I come in there? The vaccination programme will be based on the recommendation of a group of clinicians at a national level. They make the recommendations to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All of the vaccination programmes are based on those recommendations and on clinical evidence. I am basing my answer on my previous experience in the Health Department. Health officials and the PHA will be led by that evidence as to what is the right level of vaccination for our general population. That is all that we can say: we will be led by the science, and we expect Health officials to lead on that.

Mr McNulty: I have been contacted by a number of concerned teachers and parents about the guidance in relation to children who are ill. Can a simple parent-friendly leaflet be distributed so that parents have no uncertainty and are completely clear about when they should keep their kids at home?

Mr Murphy: We are in the process of drafting a leaflet that will go to all parents to try and explain the symptoms. We are, ultimately, led by the Public Health Agency guidance on what those symptoms are. We will make sure that the guidance is cleared by the Public Health Agency. For example, I understand that, in Scotland, they have written to parents to explain the difference between a normal cough, cold and snuffle and a long, continuous cough. We will be taking anything that we can get to help explain that.

Mr McNulty: Parents, principals and teachers feel that the present guidance is too ambiguous, too up in the air and open to interpretation. Strong and unambiguous guidance should be issued as soon as possible. How soon can we expect that to be issued?

Mr Murphy: The leaflet is currently being drafted. As to whether it will be strong and unambiguous, that is almost impossible. We will only be able to give a set of guidance and criteria. Public health officials are reluctant to go beyond the existing symptoms that are there. Therefore, as individuals, we have the same as is given to our GPs and clinicians. Our advice will be that schools and parents should take a very precautionary approach. If they believe that those symptoms are there, they should keep their children at home or they should remain at home and go through the test-and-trace process and get the symptoms validated with a negative or positive test. That is the best means of breaking transmission in the system.

Mr McNulty: OK. How is the data for the number of staff and students who have been shielding being lifted?

Mr Murphy: Health officials have said that there are about 80,000 to 100,000 people who have been shielding across the Province. Are you asking about the general workforce?

Mr McNulty: I am talking about teachers and staff.

Mr Murphy: With regard to teachers, the guidance from the PHA is very clear. It says that shielding no longer applies and that therefore you can return to work, and that is the general public health guidance. What we have done is institute an arrangement to reassure staff that the system and procedures are clear and we are using a risk assessment that has a joint approach. It does not require medical advice. It is about saying that here are the systems in place for an individual coming back into school who has been shielding. From the health point of view, it is very clear that the entire system of mitigations that have been put in place makes schools a safe place to both work and learn.

Mr McNulty: An issue has come to me from a mother in my constituency. She is concerned about her son who has dyslexia. He has had literacy support for the last academic year, which meant that he was taken out of the classroom on a weekly basis for specialist one-on-one support. Since the arrival of COVID, that support has been halted. The mother is very concerned. What advice, guidance or answer can you give me? What can I say to that mother about what she can expect for her child? How many other children are in a similar scenario? What are you doing to address this matter for those children who were getting additional support which has now stopped? When will the support recommence?

Ms Corkey: Justin, obviously I do not know the particulars of that case. However, no decision has been made to stop literacy support in any school, unless the child's circumstances have changed. Again, I cannot comment on one single case, but I do know that not only has literacy support in schools not ceased, but the Engage programme will be launched very soon which will give extra support to schools for literacy, numeracy, ICT, health and well-being, and learning recovery to make sure that any loss of learning is picked up on. I do not know the particulars of the case, but I am not aware of any literacy support being removed.

Mr McNulty: So there is no policy being introduced whereby a member of staff can move between different individuals to give them specialist support?

Mr Murphy: Again, this is about the interpretation of the guidance by individual schools. If a teacher who is involved in one-to-one tuition with an individual pupil can maintain social distancing, even if they move between bubbles, there is absolutely minimal risk, and therefore there is nothing to stop it. That is actually the same position, as I understand from our Health colleagues, for the normal speech and language therapy and all those who provide other health interventions in school, be they educational psychologists or whatever else. They will be returning to as-near-to-normal operation over the next few weeks. They will follow their own protocols for PPE, because they are very clearly moving between school environments and school classrooms etc. In managing that process, it is no different from a speech and language therapist going in to see an individual child in school A and then driving 10 miles to go to school B. We have to find ways to manage the risks. I understand and empathise with principals who are very much taking a precautionary approach in dealing with their staff in these first few weeks, but I see no reason why that should be continued.

Mr McNulty: That email from the Education Authority was received this morning in relation to the child not having a continuation of the specialist support for their dyslexia. That is very worrying to me.

Ms Corkey: Justin, again, I cannot comment on a particular case. There may be other mitigating circumstances. I will have to look into that, and I will do so when I get back.

Mr McNulty: OK, I will forward the details. I would like that to be addressed pronto, please.

Finally, I have raised on multiple occasions the issue of at-risk children returning to school and how their challenges will be identified. Are teachers proactively looking out for kids who may have been under severe duress during the pandemic because of conditions at home? What processes are in place to identify those kids and to give them the necessary help and support?

Ms Corkey: As I say, Justin, a lot of resources have been put online, and a lot of training that has been immersed in trauma-informed practice has taken place for staff through webinars. All the work that is going on in schools is about identifying well-being and where children are in their learning. Absolutely, that is the focus, and a lot of resources are available both in school and on the EA website and the Department website.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, guys. I appreciate that you are under huge stress as well and that you are doing your best. Thank you very much for your responses today.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Justin.

John and Michele, as Daniel said earlier, the Education Minister has advised the High Court that transfer tests for post-primary admissions in 2021 will be delayed to 9 January 2021, with the Education Authority operating a compressed timetable for the admissions and appeals process. My position remains that the impact of COVID-19 places a responsibility on the Education Minister, the Association for Quality Education (AQE), the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) and schools to find a better way to administer post-primary transfer than high-stakes tests for 10-year-olds, preparation for which will now span the Christmas holidays. That appears to quash the Education Minister's assertion that he has no control over the transfer process. Can you advise what the new schedule for post-primary admissions will be, how that is deliverable and what the additional costs will be?

Mr Smith: Obviously, that is breaking news today. We need to work through the ramifications of that in terms of resources and timescales. I am not at liberty to give you an answer on that here and now.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Did the Education Minister consult the Education Authority on the compression of the Education Authority's operation of the admissions and appeals process prior to the announcement?

Mr Hanna: Chair, I can confirm that, yes, the Education Authority was involved in providing information to the Minister about the timetable for the admissions process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What is the new timetable?

Mr Hanna: Well, we have not agreed the specific timetable. Again, we were providing information to the Department of Education about that. I do not know what the exact ramifications are for our timetable, but we will come back to you about that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Has the Education Minister committed the Education Authority to a new timetable without agreeing with you what that new timetable is?

Mr Hanna: We will come back to that.

Mr Smith: We will need to come back to you on that, Chair, I am afraid. I do not want to mislead members of the Committee on any aspect of this, so I think that we would need to come back to you in slower time.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that you would like to come back to me, but I think that those are fairly straightforward questions to answer.

Mr Smith: Well, personally, I do not know the answer.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Well, if that is the case —.

Mr Smith: There is nothing more that I can say to you than that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so the Education —.

Mr Smith: As I said, I am not going to speculate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. The Education Authority is present, and it is referenced in the public announcement that was made today to say that it will operate a compressed timetable for admissions and the appeals process. I presume that you know what that compressed timetable is or that you are aware that you have been committed to it, so what —?

Mr Hanna: Chair, what I can say is that we were able to confirm that we were able to operate to shorter time periods for various elements of the overall timetable, but I do not have the detail in front of me.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Which, previously, the Education Authority and the Department of Education said that it could not do. What has changed?

Mr Hanna: Again, we have done more work on that in consultation with the Department of Education, and we have been able to identify opportunities to streamline elements of our administration.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): At additional cost?

Mr Hanna: Elements of it will be at additional cost, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How much?

Mr Hanna: I do not have that figure in front of me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You must have costed it.

Mr Hanna: Pardon?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It must have been costed. They would not just make a decision without having costed it. Or have they?

Mr Hanna: Yes, it was costed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): At what additional cost? Is it being met by the Department of Education or the Education Authority?

Mr Hanna: Well, again, Chair, given that the announcement was made whilst I was sitting in the room, I cannot give you that answer, and I do not have the costs in front of me.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, and that is something —.

Mr Smith: Chair, it might not be a satisfactory answer for you, but transfer tests are not part of my area of responsibility, so I think that the best that we can do is to come back to you on this. None of us in the room are across this particular area of DE policy.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I presume that it is known to the Education Authority representatives in the room.

Mr Hanna: Chair, I have given you all the information that I currently have available to give you whilst I am here.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So you do not know the additional cost of the compressed timetable for admissions and appeals.

Mr Hanna: No. I do not have the figure in front of me. If I had the figure, I would give you the figure.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): A final question on this. What allowances will be made for any P7 pupil who loses further school-based education time due to COVID-19?

Ms Corkey: That is part of the Engage programme, Chair. Whenever the —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sorry, I mean specifically in relation to post-primary admission and transfer tests 2021. What allowances will be made for any P7 pupil who loses further school-based education time due to COVID-19 with regard to post-primary transfer 2021 and the transfer tests?

Mr Smith: Again, Chair, the policy branch dealing with that is not in the room with us today. We will need to get back to you on that. I do not know the answer to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I realise that the public announcement has been made via a court process and that that court process had to be respected before engaging with the Education Committee, but the Department and the Education Authority will be aware of the extent of the Committee's engagement in that issue, and I would appreciate an urgent update from the Department and the Education Authority in response to the questions I have asked.

Mr Smith: OK, point taken, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, thank you. Any further questions, members? No? OK.

Witnesses, thank you very much for your time today. We will be in further contact on a range of the issues that we have covered. Thank you.