



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Restart: Department of
Education/Education Authority

9 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 Robbie Butler
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Tina Dempster	Department of Education
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 in the Department of Education; Adrian Murphy, the Department's head of area planning for the north region; Tina Dempster, head of the Department's childcare strategy team; Michele Corkey, director of education in the Education Authority (EA); and Dale Hanna, the Education Authority's acting director of operations and estates. I advise witnesses that the proceedings will be reported by Hansard. I refer Committee members to their packs, which include a cover note from the Committee Clerk, correspondence from the Department on school restart, DE guidance on restart and departmental correspondence, which was sent to every school last week. The tabled items include the latest relevant outgoing correspondence from the Committee, a paper from the Department providing an update on childcare and the Department of Education/Education Authority weekly update report on school restart.

By way of welcome to our witnesses, I say that the Committee has sought urgent clarity on a number of issues. The first is the number of medically vulnerable children requiring a risk assessment and the progress that is being made in that regard, including the provision of out-of-school or blended-learning support. The second issue is clarification on pupil and teaching and non-teaching staff attendance/absentee levels in schools since 31 August 2020. The third issue is the provision of a simple mechanism by which schools can avail themselves of the additional financial support for COVID costs, such as cleaning, additional teaching and human resources, and a timescale by which that mechanism will be put in place and explained to schools.

I ask officials to ensure that you answer those three questions in your opening remarks. I also invite you to speak to the childcare update. On that note, I will hand over to John to make his opening remarks.

Mr John Smith (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair, and good morning. We have provided you with the weekly update report on progress. I can give you an overview of some of the topics in the correspondence that you just mentioned, but I understand that the written replies are due to be with you in the next few days. You will therefore receive the official responses to that correspondence in due course. The Clerk had indicated that post-primary transfer arrangements are due to be discussed at a separate evidence session later this month, so we have not given a detailed update on those arrangements in the weekly report.

On the childcare theme, Tina is here, and, as you said, you have received a paper on the childcare arrangements. I will briefly summarise some of the key points, and Tina will be able to answer any detailed questions later. As of today, approximately £7.5 million of the childcare recovery support fund has been allocated to providers, and that is about 73% of the overall budget. As I said last week, we are considering a joint proposal from the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA) for additional funding to be allocated, potentially for the July and August period. Looking ahead, we continue to consult with the childcare reference group about what support, if any, might be required by the sector from September onwards.

In the area of curriculum, assessment and remote learning, you will be aware that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) launched a consultation on qualifications and exams on 24 August. Around 3,500 responses have been received to date, and that consultation was due to close on 7 September. Around 5,500 mobile devices have been delivered to schools as part of the scheme that we launched earlier this year, and the remaining devices are due to be delivered at a rate of around 1,000 a week throughout September. In addition, the Education Authority has bought 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers to help disadvantaged children, and those will provide up to eight months of free Internet access. Nearly 600 requests were received for those in June and July, and requests for a further 1,413 vouchers were received in August and are being processed. In addition, an initial quantity of 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which work for up to eight months, have been requested, and 620 devices have been received to date.

We have continued to design the Engage programme by working with the practitioners' group and trade union side on the detail, and a detailed guidance document should be issued to schools in September. We have been working on developing an Engage planner to help the operation of the scheme, and the Department and the employing authorities will use that to monitor uptake of the programme by the schools and how those resources are being utilised. We also plan to create a strategic oversight group to oversee how the programme is unfolding this year. That group will comprise representatives from the Department and the employing authorities and teachers. The budget for that scheme is £11.2 million for the 2020-21 financial year.

Any decision to deploy mobile COVID-19 testing to a school will be taken in conjunction with the Public Health Agency (PHA), and it will take that decision based on the profile of cases identified through the track-and-trace programme. More recently, the Department has agreed to take part in the national testing initiative that is being run by the healthcare services in England, and that initiative will provide every school, as well as FE colleges, with 10 individual home-testing kits. If a parent or carer is unable to secure a test for a child who has COVID symptoms, one of those kits can be given to the parent or carer to take home. The tests will not be undertaken by the school or the college but will be done at home. We are also aware that, recently, a number of erroneous emails have been issued to schools from the Department of Health and Social Care in England, and we are working closely with that organisation to make sure that no further emails are sent out.

On operational matters, specifically catering, I can say that all school kitchens reopened as planned on 1 September. The free-school-meal box service commenced on 2 September, and that is providing food parcels to a number of children who are entitled to free meals but are unable to attend school owing to COVID restrictions. The EA is keeping close to school principals on that. A pulse check was done on 4 September to find out how the service is working in practice so that we can take feedback and refine it as necessary. So far, the feedback from that pulse check has been positive.

EA transport services resumed as normal, in full, with minimal disruption to services beyond the normal levels of tolerance. The EA has put in place some mitigation measures in the context of COVID. Over 700 hand sanitiser units have been installed on the EA operational fleet. PPE — masks, visors, hand sanitiser, gloves, aprons and cleaning products, as appropriate — has been distributed to drivers and escorts. The EA arranged additional PPE collection points for last Friday following trade union feedback that the PPE had not been sufficient. So far, take-up of that has been low. An additional measure that has been put in place that exceeds the PHA advice is that driver screens are being put up in the EA operational fleet, starting with the smaller vehicles. A plethora of guidance has

issued for parents, pupils, schools, special schools, private operators and drivers. We continue to reiterate the message that face coverings are strongly recommended to be worn on all school transport where the pupil is able to do so.

The EA's cleaning service is now fully operational. Support services quickly evolved after the outbreak of COVID to provide help, support and resources to all schools throughout Northern Ireland. The EA is establishing COVID response teams, which will be strategically located and will use specialist sanitising machines that the EA has bought for that purpose. Ten tenders for PPE are already under way or are currently being specified. Emergency packs of cleaning materials and PPE were put together, and they have been available for delivery to schools or for schools to pick up at the EA's emergency distribution centre or at the EA's headquarter buildings. There are three packs that are available to schools at this time.

As I said last week, version 2 of the New School Day guidance was issued on 13 August. The EA has set up a helpline to deal with queries and provide advice. There is a separate dedicated email inbox that is monitored 24 hours a day for any suspected or confirmed cases. I continue to stress that, for schools, their link officer is the first point of contact. The PHA should be contacted only to deal with confirmed positive cases. The contact-tracing service will kick in at that point.

We issued detailed flow charts late last week to schools, because there was feedback from schools about how best to manage confirmed or suspected cases in the school environment. We worked with the PHA on the basis of the New School Day guidance to produce flow charts that set out in some detail the steps that schools need to take, with contact telephone numbers included as well. Alongside that, we sent an email to schools to clarify the COVID-19 symptoms and the difference between those and the normal coughs and colds that appear at this time of year. We stressed that schools should advise pupils not to come to school if they have a cough, cold or runny nose and that tests should be sought only if pupils have COVID-19 symptoms.

The EA is working with key stakeholders, including young people, on the safe restart of generic youth services in October on a phased basis. The youth services group published extensive guidance on youth restart, all of which is available on the EA's website.

Turning to communications and engagement, as I think we noted last week, following advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), we have recommended that post-primary pupils and school staff should wear face coverings in corridors and other communal areas when schools return full-time. As I said earlier, we provided more guidance and detailed flow charts to schools last week covering what they should do in the case of a suspected or confirmed COVID case.

Finally, at the back of the report, we published some data metrics. We are collecting data again, and we will continue to develop this as the data systems stand up. The key headlines from your pack are that, in the week commencing 24 August, there was an overall attendance rate in schools of 95% across all schools in Northern Ireland. That is slightly lower — 1.2 percentage points lower — than it was in September 2019. The message from that is that, at least in week one, school attendance was bearing up well. On childcare settings, on 4 September, 79% of all childcare settings were open or had been approved by the health and social care trusts to open as soon as possible, and that includes 77% of childminders.

So, Chair, that is just a brief overview of the report that we sent to you yesterday, I think. I will stop there and take any questions that you or members might have. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, John. Obviously, with regard to data for school attendance, week one was largely year 7, year 12 and year 14, with some additions. The last week would have been the first week of a full return to school. What is the attendance for that week?

Mr Smith: I do not have the data for that yet, Chair. We will be able to provide that for you next week.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You did not think that we were going to ask that?

Mr Smith: OK, Adrian, thanks very much. I should say that we do have that. The latest attendance figures from the schools that complete the school information management system (SIMS) database are 92.8% for the primary sector, 94.6% for the post-primary sector, 87.2% in special schools, and 68.6% in education other than at school (EOTAS). That gives us an overall attendance figure of 93.6%, which includes the special schools sector and EOTAS.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is from 1 September? Is that last week's figures, John?

Mr Smith: Yes, that is from 1 September. There were 709 schools that responded, and the attendance rate was 96.3% for the teaching staff and 97.3% for non-teaching staff.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How do those figures for EOTAS, special, primary and post-primary schools compare to other years?

Mr Smith: I do not believe that I have those figures, Chair. I will need to come back to you on that. Apologies.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I presume that the Department is monitoring attendance in comparison to other years and that it will wish to know how attendance is going?

Mr Smith: Yes, we are monitoring it, Chair. We will be able to provide comparative stats from previous years, if we have them. However, we will monitor the numbers on a weekly basis going forward.

Mr Adrian Murphy (Department of Education): I will add that, at this point, it is most useful to compare against some of the other European countries that have brought their education systems back. Some of the most successful ones that we are aware of in Germany and Holland started with something like 80% to 85% attendance, even in the smaller groups and tranches of people that they had. Therefore, getting anywhere above 90% is being seen as an extremely positive result, and it shows a great deal of faith from our parents that the system that we have developed is safe and secure.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. On the question of how many extremely clinically vulnerable pupils, or pupils with extremely clinically vulnerable family members, are in the system and awaiting risk assessment, can you provide us with an update?

Mr Dale Hanna (Education Authority): Chair, I can take that. I cannot give you the actual number of children, but I can advise that we are working with a range of stakeholders around each of those cases to try to make sure that we get the children back into school as quickly as possible.

Mr Murphy: I will add to that, if you do not mind, Chair. There is a very small group of children with challenging symptoms or diseases who would normally be returning to special schools, and they will be going through that transition process with a level of risk assessment and engagement with health professionals and education professionals. Our latest advice from the Public Health Agency is that risk assessments are no longer required for other individuals or pupils who were vulnerable or extremely clinically vulnerable, and we are currently working on redrafting that advice. Its advice is that all children in that sector should be at school, other than the most extremely clinically vulnerable who have been advised by a hospital consultant or, where they are not in the care of a hospital consultant, directly by their GP, not to attend.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Is the Department monitoring the levels of COVID infection amongst school pupils and staff?

Mr Murphy: Again, I can give you some data on that. We know how many schools have been in contact with us and with the Education Authority to reflect the number of positive cases that have been reported to them. Unfortunately, the Department itself does not know what the actual number of cases is; that data is held by the PHA. PHA holds all the testing data and key information on which pupils or contacts of pupils have been confirmed as a positive case. All we know, at the point when we are managing the system, is that we have been contacted by a number of parents and a number of schools or that we have closures. I understand that, as at yesterday, there were 88 reports to schools of a positive case in 64 educational settings. After that, we do not know the number of pupils, and we will not be in a position ever to know the number of pupils, who have received positive tests.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Just to make sure that I am clear, Adrian, you are saying that 64 educational settings in Northern Ireland have positive COVID cases?

Mr Murphy: That is our understanding, based on the latest information from the reports from teachers to the EA. You need to be mindful that that is out of 1,300 educational establishments, so 64 is actually a very, very small proportion.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I presume that the Department of Education will want live data about positive COVID cases in schools.

Mr Murphy: We will never know that, because that data is personal to the individual. It is only to the extent that a parent or a member of staff actually advises the school that they have a child who has had a positive test that you become aware of it. There is no capacity for the test-and-trace system to share that data with us. That is personal to the individual.

Mr Smith: I can come in there, Chair. We are working on specifying the data that we need to collect for the purposes of managing the education system. For example, at the moment, we know how many education settings are reporting positive cases. As Adrian said, we are not focused on collecting individual names and numbers, but we are interested in managing the information that we need to help us in how we run the system, so that might be numbers of schools that have had to part close —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is what I was asking, John. I do not think that I was asking for individual names of pupils.

Mr Smith: We are working on that at the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. If the PHA holds information about positive cases in educational settings, I presume that you are asking for that information. I am not suggesting that you are asking for individual names — nor am I — but I presume that you are asking the PHA to share information with regard to positive cases in educational settings.

Mr Smith: We are also getting that from the Education Authority. Whether it comes from the EA or the PHA, we are receiving that data, so we know which educational settings or schools they are, and we can map them by geographical location and by phase. We are also able to know what management action those schools have needed to take — whether it is year groups or individual classes that have been infected. That is the kind of information that we need, and that is the kind of information that we are getting.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am out of my self-enforced time, but, very briefly in closing, in our last session, we engaged with the Northern Ireland Teaching Council (NITC), which comprises approximately five unions, and there was a very clear message of serious concern with regard to the current proposal for curriculum and assessment 2020-21 and a very clear commitment to have improved and intense engagement with CCEA on behalf of the teaching profession in order to avoid negative impact on pupils. Why have the school restart practitioners' group and the school restart stakeholder forum not been employed in co-production with CCEA of the proposals for the curriculum and assessment 2020-21?

Mr Smith: Chair, the focus of that group, as far as I understand it, was on production of the New School Day guidance. To what extent it may or may not have been involved in the curriculum is something that we would need to get back to you on. As I said, our focus —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I can get back to you on it today. I do not think that it was, and that is why I am asking. If that was a constructive format for the production of the school restart guidance, is that not also a constructive format that could be used to ensure that the curriculum and assessment 2020-21 approach that is finalised has been designed in co-production with teaching practitioners?

Mr Smith: Well, I do not think that that practitioners' group was ever intended to address the curriculum and the examination aspects of it, Chair, but I am sure that my colleagues were listening to the earlier session, and that is something that we can look at going forward and take on board as necessary.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The Northern Ireland Teaching Council is telling you today that these proposals will have a negative impact on pupils in Northern Ireland. That is why I am asking the question. Is there a format that could facilitate urgent engagement with the teaching profession on

proposals that it is saying will have a negative impact on pupils? I presume that that is pretty concerning to you.

I need to move on and bring in Karen Mullan, Deputy Chairperson.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, everybody, for attending this morning. Picking up on the point that Chris finished on in relation to the unions, I have been made aware that the latest guidance went out late on Friday night, and they were told to respond on Monday morning. That is again consistent with the message that we are getting that co-design and consultation are not happening across the board. I am just making a point on that.

John, in relation to the COVID symptoms, you gave an update about an email going to principals. Last week, I asked for a graphic to be done and sent out to parents. I am not sure if that has been actioned.

Mr Smith: Yes, Karen, we have a leaflet that is going through final desktop publishing, for want of a better word. We aim to issue it in a day or so through schools, aimed at all parents and carers, and it will be available through our website as well. That leaflet will cover two things. First, the difference between COVID and non-COVID symptoms and what parents and carers should do in that regard. It also puts on paper a series of scenarios that are intended to help parents know what do when, for example, a child or someone in the house has COVID-like symptoms, or if a child has been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID. There are half a dozen or so scenarios in a helpful one-page fact sheet, with all the details of what parents need to do and the circumstances in which their children can return to school. Hopefully, that will provide some clarification.

Ms Mullan: That would be great, John.

Mr Smith: On the first point that you made about —

Mr Newton: Chair, may I come in on that?

Mr Smith: — the guidance issuing on Friday night —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Just one second. Robin Newton wants to ask a supplementary question on that matter before I bring you back in, John.

Mr Newton: I have been scrolling through the information that you provided. Yesterday, I had in my office a parent whose child was sent home from school, as were two other children from the same family, because they had cold-like, as opposed to COVID-19-type, symptoms. What is the role of a principal or a school — this case was in primary- and secondary-level education — when children attend with a cold as opposed to COVID-19 symptoms?

Mr Smith: We clarified this. We worked closely with the PHA on this, Robin. Kids will get colds at this time of year — runny noses, head colds. That is not COVID-19. A child who has a cold but does not have COVID-19 symptoms should, if they are fit and able, go to school. Schools should not be sending children home if they do not have COVID symptoms. They should not be asking for COVID-19 tests if children do not have COVID-19 symptoms.

Mr Newton: I have to say that I would have shared the concerns of the parent that three children in her family had been sent home from school. Maybe clarification needs to be sent directly to schools, and perhaps more than I have seen in the guidance that you provided.

Mr Smith: We put out that guidance on Friday, Robin.

Mr Newton: OK, thank you.

Ms Mullan: Robin's point touches on the earlier issue of testing. In a primary school in my city, there have been a number of positive cases. Class by class, pupils throughout the school are now getting tested. We are seeing major pressure, and children who have been sent home are being sent for testing. It is probably that people are being a bit cautious, as Robin highlighted. That was also highlighted at the Committee meeting last week.

You said, John, that the location of the mobile testing unit was up to the PHA. However, in a case like that, can the Education Authority not request that the mobile unit go to that school? We have irate, very worried parents on the phone whose children are not able to get tested. We were out talking to people about this yesterday. Some are being given the option of a test in Scotland, England and other places. In this instance, rather than leaving it up to the PHA, can the Education Authority request that the mobile unit attend a school and carry out those tests?

Mr Murphy: The PHA will lead on where the risk is. The issue is that when schools tell pupils to go home, self-isolate and wait to be contacted by the PHA, we understand — I, as a parent, fully understand — that they will want to get a test for their child.

The PHA will not test a child unless there are definite COVID-19 symptoms. Children have been told to protectively self-isolate. In the example of a class being sent home, where one child was symptomatic or one child had a positive case, and all 29 others go looking for a test, we know that the negative result rate is about 98% on all tests. Therefore, 29 children have been sent for a test that was unnecessary. Testing is required only when someone is symptomatic —

Ms Mullan: Adrian, sorry —.

Mr Murphy: — and the PHA will not do those tests. That is why —.

Ms Mullan: I am talking about children who are symptomatic. There seems to be a high proportion of children who are symptomatic, and the PHA has agreed to carry out the tests. I know the difference. I am not asking for this for all schools. There is a particular issue in this school, which will be an issue in a lot of schools in the North. I am just asking the question: where a high proportion of children are symptomatic, can the EA request mobile testing? We are seeing the pressures across the system when it comes to testing the wider community. We do not want schools to be locked down unnecessarily. Can you make that request?

Mr Murphy: I go my earlier point, which is that the EA can request that, but the PHA will manage that risk because it is the only organisation that knows the wider context in local society: what other tests are required and where the "hotspots" are. Testing capacity is limited, and the PHA wants to manage it.

The clear advice is to self-isolate, and you can get a test. Whether the test happens two days or five afterwards, you will know by then whether you have it. I appreciate that, as a parent, I would want to know as quickly as possible, but it will not help if the testing system is flooded with people coming through. In this case, you are talking about something that is, very clearly, a range of symptomatic cases. However, what we are getting from many other schools is a result from one individual, and reports of 100 other children being protectively isolated, with parents then looking for tests. That is flooding the capacity of the system, and not just in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland is facing the same issue as the schools have come back. Scotland faced it three weeks ago, and England is facing it as well. The issue is the capacity of the system to deal with that flood.

Ms Mullan: I totally get that. That is why I ask that we take some of the schoolchildren out of the system and leave more testing for the community. I have made my point, and also —.

Mr Smith: May I come in there, Karen?

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

Mr Smith: Schools are participating in a national testing initiative. All schools will get 10 home-testing kits, so, if parents are struggling to source the test through the usual channels, that route is available to them.

Ms Mullan: Yes. I have advised that.

Mr Smith: Of course, we are working every day with the PHA. That is the organisation that will decide whether the current testing capacity is meeting demand regionally, and, if there is a need for other interventions, such as mobile units, that will be considered. However, we will be guided by the PHA in that regard.

Ms Mullan: Thank you. My final point follows from what the Chair said. I would have thought that it was mandatory for a principal to report a positive test in their school, but we have gone over that.

My time is very short, so I want to move on to some of my other issues. I welcome the fact that Dale and the team have taken on the concerns that we raised about transport last week and have stepped in. I also welcome the Department's work on devices and Wi-Fi vouchers. We have been in contact with you about those for a long time, so it is very welcome.

When was the guidance or direction to schools on blended online learning last updated? What training for teachers has happened or is happening?

Mr Smith: Karen, will you repeat that question?

Ms Mullan: Yes. When was the guidance or direction to school leaders on blended or remote learning last updated? What training for staff has happened or is happening?

Mr Smith: I do not have a precise date for when we last put out guidance. In August, we issued a circular on blended learning and how schools can prepare their curriculum and adapt it for 2021, but I do not have the precise date to hand, Karen.

Ms Mullan: We had an update from the unions just this morning. They say that the guidance may have been issued on 6 June. It may be something that you want to look at, update and come back to us with a bit of detail.

We had the update on school meals, read it and asked the question last week: from what date will hot school meals be provided? Can you give us a timeline for moving towards that, Dale?

Mr Hanna: We have been working with each of the schools, on an individual basis, about what they want to do and what to bring in. Principals, in general, have been quite cautious. Last week, there was quite a high uptake of packed lunches. What I can say is that we have written to school leaders this week encouraging schools to take up hot meals, and we are working with schools on an individual basis to encourage that. We have limited hot meal menu choices available. We are working hard with school leaders to make sure that they can put that in place in their individual school.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Dale. It is important that we get that in place. As we know, it may be the only hot meal that children get, so it is important that we move towards that.

Tina, you may not be able to answer my question on childcare. I have written to the Minister and will follow this up with him. Community crèches and community facilities have not been able to apply to the childcare recovery fund because they do not meet the criteria. Many of these organisations provide vital services in most of our disadvantaged communities, with little funding and minimal or no income to enable them to provide PPE and ensure the safe return to work that the other facilities had. I believe that this was overlooked. Can you, the Department and the Minister look at this again to see whether those facilities can avail themselves of some of the available funding?

Ms Tina Dempster (Department of Education): Yes, Karen. We did look at the crèche issue. There are many types of registration in the childcare sector. Crèches are time-limited, and most run at less than four hours. Over a third are through Sure Starts that continued to receive their funding. Some of the crèches are run in women's centres, which continue to receive funding from the Department for Communities, and some are privately run in places such as gyms and IKEA. When we looked at the recovery fund, we found that its purpose was to enable parents to go back to work, which is in line with the Executive's recovery planning. The view at that stage was that crèches were for time-limited activities. From information in the Department of Health's registration database, we are aware of about 81 crèches.

We can look at this issue, and we are aware of your correspondence. We did look at crèches. However, given the purpose of the recovery fund, the limited money available, the priority of aligning with the Executive recovery planning to get people back to work, crèches, at that stage, were not deemed to be for that purpose; they were for other very short-term, time-limited purposes. We are happy to look at that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We need to move this on, Karen.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Tina. It concerns community facilities more than crèches, and not IKEA crèches. The two that I am talking about are in two of the most disadvantaged communities in my constituency and are not under Sure Start.

My last point —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If you can make it very brief.

Ms Mullan: What we hear on the ground about the support for principals is not consistent with what you are telling us. I do not know about other members, but since the Committee meeting last week, I have been inundated by principals telling me about the lack of support that they are receiving. The helpline is not cutting it, and there are issues with the link officer. There are gaps there. You need to pick it up, re-engage with the principals and properly support them. School leaders are still waiting to receive their time budgets from the Education Authority, but I have written to the Minister on that.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Ms Mullan] in the Chair)

Mr Newton: Welcome, John and your team. Thank you.

The attendance figures that you put out were very impressive and indicate parental confidence that it is safe for children to return to school. It speaks well for the future.

The Chair has just left the room. I was going to ask his permission to ask a number of relatively short and focused questions. Now that pupils have received enhanced grades, there is the potential that more will opt to stay on to do A levels. What will be the impact of those additional pupils on a school's budget?

What are your observations on the school transport situation, the use of public transport for going and coming to school and how well it is working?

We have raised the point, several times, of the at-risk children who are returning to school. There are around 2,000 at-risk children in Northern Ireland. Have you an indication of how many of those children have returned to school, and of the success of that return? Is there engagement with the PHA on those children returning to school?

Mr Smith: The budget is allocated through the common funding formula, the majority of which goes through on the basis of pupil numbers according to the annual school census. The pupils going back into school will feed into the census data, and that will have implications for what comes through from the schools' delegated budgets. Dale, do you have something on school transport?

Mr Hanna: We had a successful return to the school transport system. The network is coping well and being delivered within normal tolerances. We accept that there will be bumps along the road with some routes or pupils, but, given that we have managed to stand the transport system up again, it has been successful. I acknowledge the drivers — our drivers, the Translink service and the private operators — who support us. They have been brilliant. They have worked hard, and I acknowledge their efforts. We have also had positive engagement with our trade union colleagues, which has helped us to return the service and be successful. The EA is working closely with Translink on an ongoing basis to manage the network and to make sure that we deal with any issues. Compared with any other September, the transport system is operating like any other year. I am satisfied that we have done a relatively good job around that.

(The Chairperson [Mr Lyttle] in the Chair)

Mr Smith: Robin, you asked about at-risk children. All the EA services that existed previously for those children, and in respect of the Department of Health, are up and running again. Obviously, COVID has created a different dimension to that, and, as schools return, we will need to work through the implications for pupils' emotional health and well-being. As you know, we are working to finalise the framework for emotional health and well-being by December of this year. Schools have already been provided with a number of resources around that through the school development service and the portal, particularly around bereavement and loss, critical incident response, looked-after children and nurture. All those are informed by trauma-informed practice

Mr Newton: Is the attendance of at-risk children as it should be? Is there any indication that they are not attending or are hard to get back to school?

Mr Smith: We know that there was 93.6% attendance last week, including in special schools and EOTAS settings. That was 68.6% in EOTAS, but, at this stage, I do not have a breakdown of the cohort of looked-after children.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you to our guests this week again. There are a number of pressing issues. Just to follow on from a point that Robin Newton raised about the allocation for numbers in schools. John answered it. John, you were slightly wrong in that the set amount allocated to schools for children is the same, but the actual number in schools, as of next year, will be higher given that there will be a larger number of young people doing AS and A levels because the grades were higher this year, meaning that they can continue in school. So, there will be less per head per school. I think that that needs to be clarified.

One particular issue that I want to raise is in relation to the childcare recovery scheme, which intends to allocate £10.5 million. Has that funding all been distributed? I also note that the Unite union wrote to the Department of Education in July complaining bitterly that the allocation for registered childminders was woefully inadequate and grossly unfair. It predicted that many childminders would leave the sector, which I believe to be accurate. Did the Department meet Unite to resolve the problem? How was it addressed? Does the Department have any further plans for childminders?

It appears that the administration of the scheme was shocking. This figure is shocking. The administration of the scheme, over two months, cost £176,000, which is £88,000 per month to allocate those funds. Do you believe, John, that that is value for money? It is a colossal sum for the administration or distribution of money to those sectors. Do you believe that £88,000 per month, amounting to £176,000, is value for money?

Mr Smith: OK, Daniel. There are a few points there. Tina might come in as well with the detail. As of today, 73% of that budget has been allocated. That is £7.5 million. We know that the Childminding Association has some issues with the amount of money that it is getting. That association and Unite met with the Minister, and we are considering a proposal from both organisations over additional funding to be allocated for July to September.

Do I believe that the money that we have paid to administer the scheme is value for money? It has been effective. The money has been distributed in a timely way. Uptake of that scheme has been good, and, ultimately, we paid to receive a service, and it appears to be working. Tina, do you have anything to add on that?

Ms Dempster: I concur with what John said. Just yesterday, the allocation went up to £7.8 million, with 76% of the total allocation, and 98% of the applications received have been paid. So, the administration of the scheme is working very effectively. The scheme opened for applications on 27 July, and, at this stage, 98% of the applications have been paid and 76% of the total grant has been paid out and will continue. The scheme is open until 11 September.

Mr McCrossan: I am delighted that the allocation has been rolled out as it should be. I have long raised concerns in relation to it and the impact that it is having on the sector, particularly on childminders, but I still have grave concerns about the figures that I have read. It costs £22,000 per week to administer a scheme to allocate and distribute funds to registered childminders around the sector for the childcare recovery scheme. So, it costs £22,000 per week. Are you seriously telling me that that is value for money? It costs £88,000 per month to distribute funds and £176,000 for two months. It is a serious amount of money.

Ms Dempster: It is, absolutely, but a full online IT system had to be developed because we took on board criticisms about the first scheme, which was a hard-copy system. So, we are talking about an IT system being developed and implemented. We are talking about potentially 5,000 applications. Individual invites had to be sent out with email links. All the stuff can be uploaded online. There is no hard copy or difficulty with the bureaucracy of that. The scheme is paying out within six to nine days on average. Behind that is all the reporting analysis and all the stuff that we need. People need to be there to administer and check; a verification and checking element still has to be done, and you need the resources and staffing to do that.

Mr McCrossan: My question is quite direct. Does the Department of Education believe that this is value for money in terms of the distribution, given the cost of £88,000 a month and £176,000 for two months?

Mr Smith: Let me put it this way: the cost of providing that service as a proportion of the overall value of the fund is something like 2%. That is a 2% overhead, which, out of £10 million, is £200,000. Is that right? As you know, value for money is not just about price; it is about economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Is this scheme effective? I would say that it is. Is it being dealt with in an administratively efficient manner? I would suggest that it is. An overhead price of about 2% of the value of the fund does not seem to be an extortionate price to pay for a well-run scheme that is delivering support in a timely manner to a sector that is in dire need of support and recovery.

Mr McCrossan: There is no doubt that the sector is in dire need of support and recovery. As I said, I, and colleagues on the Committee, have long argued that that should be the case and that the Department should be leading from the front instead of being pushed in the back on this issue. We will not agree today, but I still have concerns on the cost of the distribution of funds to a sector that desperately needs the funds. I do not believe that £88,000 a month is value for money, but we will explore that further.

On another point, considering the terrible problems around the awarding of grades for GCSE, AS and A2 levels this year, will the Department release to us the advice furnished to the Department by CCEA and the subsequent directions to CCEA from the Department? Both those questions could also be put to the Minister. In other words, who was advising whom, and can we be furnished with the advice so that we can consider what advice and guidance was given that resulted in the Department reaching the conclusions that it reached on grading?

Mr Smith: As you said, that is a matter for the Minister, Daniel. We will consider that request when we receive it.

Mr McCrossan: The Minister would seek advice, undoubtedly. That is why there is a permanent secretary, a deputy permanent secretary and others: to give advice. CCEA would have received advice, and it is important in the interests of transparency, given how badly it was handled not only by CCEA but by the Minister and the Department of Education, that we see that advice.

We are seeing quite a bit of transparency around the model that was used in England and the price of that, and heads have rolled as a result. There still needs to be accountability around what advice was given, who advised whom and who, ultimately, made the decision on what advice was taken. I will raise that with the Minister, but I wanted to put that on record with you, as the deputy permanent secretary in the Department.

I have a final question, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I am trying to be as sharp as possible.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are learning, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: Over a number of months, I have raised the C2k service continually with the Department, with your colleague Derek Baker, and with the Minister and the EA. Schools are reporting considerable issues about that, including file server failures and very slow loading speeds. The C2k infrastructure is quite old, and there appear to be delays in awarding contracts. In fact, a tender process has not even opened yet. The C2k system went out of date in 2017 and should have been replaced then. There was an extension to 2019, and we are now close to 2021. I want the Department of Education and, indeed, the EA, given that the officials and directors are there, to explain that situation. Given the crisis situation that we are in with blended learning and the need to ensure that we have continuity of learning and minimal disruption to children's learning, and given that there could be an outbreak in a school and a subsequent closure at any time, what is happening with this system, which we rely on heavily for a majority of subjects?

Mr Smith: Daniel, from the Department's perspective, and the EA's as well, it is clear that the C2k system is integral in supporting schools to deliver the curriculum. It is in everybody's interests that we

have a seamless service that runs medium- to long-term in the future. When it comes to procurement, I know that our finance director is working really closely with EA colleagues on oversight of the project. The EA is trying to move that forward as quickly as it can.

Do you want to expand on that, Dale?

Mr Hanna: I am not aware that there are technical issues, but we will take that back and investigate it. As it stands, we believe that the C2k system can continue to meet the needs of schools until such time as the new system is put in place. A procurement exercise is under way, and the project is in place. There are some very challenging timescales for achieving that, and my colleague Michele updated the Committee on that last week. We will take away your comments about technical issues, but I am not aware of that.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you very much for answering that question, Dale. *[Inaudible.]* I will turn to the concerns that have been raised. Very reliable sources have said that file server failures have been reported. In addition to that, one of the biggest challenges is slow loading speeds. If the demand on the system increases, the system could fail. If it fails, there will be maximum disruption to our young people's education, particularly with blended learning. I wonder whether any of you can answer this question: when will this go to tender? It is three years beyond the date when it should have been updated.

John, you said that you are trying your best to get it sorted. If it is such an integral part of our education system, why is there so much delay?

Mr Hanna: Daniel, we have a project in place, and we are finalising and working our way through the outline business case. Once that is agreed, we can put the procurement exercise in place. We have a definitive date in 2021 by which it has to be in place, and the schedule for that is on track. I cannot tell you the exact month when the procurement exercise will start, but there is a project plan in place. It is being managed, and the Education Authority is confident that we will be able to deliver the new system as required.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Daniel, I will have to stop you there. I apologise.

Mr Smith: I should say that, until that happens, the incumbent provider is still under contract to continue to support and maintain the system, as it would have been from day one of the contract. It is not the case that the EA now has an unsupported system that is at risk of falling over. The maintenance and the contractor are still in place.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thank you, John. Daniel, I will have to stop you there. I apologise.

As Daniel mentioned, C2k is the ICT system for Northern Ireland schools, and, John, you referred to it being integral to the way in which schools deliver the curriculum. I am willing to stand corrected, but my recollection of the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council's contribution this morning on C2k was, "We are finding ways to work around it". That is the Northern Ireland schools' ICT system. The Northern Ireland Teachers' Council version and the issues that Daniel raised today seem to show significant concerns about the operation of C2k. Do you accept that?

Mr Smith: I cannot comment on what the teachers said or on specific areas as to why they might feel that they need to work around the system. The EA operates and oversees that system, and it has oversight mechanisms and processes in place to make sure that any performance issues are dealt with and rectified. I cannot comment on individual situations where teachers might feel that they need to work around the system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Are the Department or the Education Authority concerned that we are hearing that people are finding ways to work around rather than use the system, which you say is integral to the way in which schools deliver the curriculum?

Mr Smith: We would need to find out what the concerns are. I am sure that the EA has ways to do that. Before the summer recess, you may remember the plethora of weekly data that we provided to you about the use of the C2k system and the number of hits a day that it was generating. It ran into tens of thousands, if not more, hits every day; that was a couple of months ago, so I do not have the figures to hand. Certainly, based on the data that we gave you then, it did not look like a system that

was being widely worked around. It looked like a system that was being widely used, and students and teachers alike logged on to it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I suppose it depends on its functionality once someone logged on.

I need to bring in Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, guys, for joining us again this week.

I will change tack a little, although I want to revisit a topic that the Deputy Chair mentioned: free school meals. Will you give us an update on the application process — the system — and any outstanding issues? I had reports over the weekend about one school, where up to 50% of those who applied had not had an answer. There are reports of some kids missing out on lunch; they had gone to school without a packed lunch, believing that they would be fed, which may not have been the case in the school. A percentage of 50% from one school is very alarming.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Ms Mullan] in the Chair)

Mr Hanna: Robbie, I will pick that up. There was an issue at the outset about verification through the jobs and benefits offices, people's incomes etc. That caused a delay in the processing of application forms. For free school meals, we process approximately 50,000 to 60,000 forms a year. The vast majority of those will be on a rolling basis, with parents coming back each year. At the start of this week, we had processed about 80% of the anticipated forms, so we are about a week behind. By the end of this week, we expect that all application forms received in the Education Authority will have been processed. As a mitigation measure, we wrote to all schools at the start of the school year and advised that, even if they had not been notified of vulnerable children or if children who were entitled to free school meals had not had their entitlement verified, they should go ahead and provide those children with a free school meal. That arrangement is still in place, and, of course, no children will be turned away, and they will get a free school meal. If there are individual cases, please bring those back to me offline and I will address them.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that, Dale. I will furnish you with the details after the meeting today. I join the call from the Deputy Chair that the sooner we get the hot meal provision safely up and running, the better it will be for those kids.

Last week, I asked a question about the helpline for principals and whether it could be extended to out of hours — beyond 5.00 pm. Has that been thought about or looked at, or is it still under consideration?

(The Chairperson [Mr Lyttle] in the Chair)

Mr Hanna: At this stage, it is still under consideration. From an EA perspective, the services that we operated over this weekend have been successful, and we have been able to make contact with principals who required advice outside of normal office hours. As we speak, we do not intend to open the helpline in the evenings or at weekends, but it is still under consideration.

Mr Butler: No problem. I would appreciate it if that issue was kept under consideration. A report on the volume of the calls would be useful to gauge how appropriate it would be.

I have one more question, Chair, on the well-being guidance that was issued in the middle of August. There was a commitment to review the guidance regularly to ensure that it was appropriate. I know that pupils can access a number of online systems. Has there been an evidence-based review of the guidance with pupils having returned now? If not, is it possible that there could be live learning, if you like, about the pressures that pupils face either by updating or improving the well-being guidance?

Mr Smith: Robbie, maybe I could address that one. Yes, the guidance will be reviewed. I am not aware that a review has taken place yet. That is not to say that it has not — it could have; I just do not know. What I would say is that schools have been back only a couple of weeks. Therefore, the evidence that is needed to inform a review might need to wait a couple more weeks until schools have three, four or five weeks of learning under their belts before we start to do any review on a more informed basis.

Mr Butler: Yes, granted. I suppose that what I am pointing towards with regard to the evidence gathering is that the review is evidence based and includes feedback, maybe even from the Children's Commissioner, on the appropriateness and performance of the well-being guidance and systems that are in place. Perhaps, you guys could look into that. Your answer is fine, John.

Mr Smith: That is a good point. If we committed to doing a review, that is what we will do.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, folks, for your evidence. Last week, I met five principals. They had a litany of concerns. The stress that they are experiencing is phenomenal. They said that their teaching staff are witnessing the challenges that they face and that nobody will ever want to be a principal after watching the demands and challenges that they face right now, the ambiguity around which direction they should take, and all sorts of issues. They are totally stressed out.

What is the percentage of DE and EA staff working from home?

Mr Smith: Sorry, say that again, Justin.

Mr McNulty: What is the percentage of DE and EA staff working from home?

Mr Smith: OK. I can answer that from a departmental perspective. The significant majority of our staff are working from home. You will be aware that that is in line with the decision-making process document that the Executive published back in May, I think, which said that the default is that people should work from home if they can. Over the course of the early summer, we provided the vast majority of our staff with IT and laptops. In some cases, staff took their desktops home to enable them to work from home. That is the default position. Our Rathgael House and Waterside House buildings have never been closed to staff. They have always been open. We are putting in place plans to facilitate the safe return of staff to the buildings when it is appropriate for them to return. There could be any number of circumstances in which staff might need to come back to work. As of today, the significant majority continue to work from home. Typically, on any given day, there may be up to 100 staff on site across Rathgael House and Waterside House.

Mr Hanna: Justin, I will give you feedback from the Education Authority. I do not want to be disingenuous because you are probably asking about corporate staff. The vast majority of EA staff are actually working on the front line. They include drivers, cleaners and classroom assistants. For our corporate staff, we decided that we needed to put in place arrangements to make sure that the organisation could continue to operate in a way that would keep schools operating. When the COVID crisis began, we identified a range of critical services that needed to remain operational and in the office. They include colleagues who deal with free school meals and student finance; staff in the children and young people's services (CYPS) directorate and SEN; payroll staff; accounts staff, because obviously we needed to ensure that suppliers etc continued to be paid; and transport colleagues. We have taken a blended approach to our staff. The staff that have to be in are in, and we maintain social distancing so that they can provide critical services to the schools. A number of corporate staff work from home, and, if they can work from home effectively, they will continue to do that. It will not be difficult to provide an exact number at a later date; I do not have the figures at hand.

Mr McNulty: I am fully in support of and encourage the facility for staff to work safely at home in their own environment during this pandemic. However, the issue is that principals are at the coalface of dealing with challenges, and they cannot make contact to get the information that they need from the Education Authority or DE. They have link officers and have said that those link officers are working very diligently and are effective in their communication with schools but that they cannot get the answers to their questions when they need them. Whenever principals are trying to contact EA, they cannot get through. They cannot get a response. That has been ongoing, and the teachers and principals are pulling their hair out. I do not want a specific response to that, but those are the facts on the ground.

John, last week you mentioned that if it was safe for a pupil to be in school this time last year, it is safe for a pupil to be in school now because of the measures that are in place. If that is the case, why is it not safe for the support staff to help kids with special educational needs to be in schools and to give them the support that they need? Why have no face-to-face special education support services been provided in the school environment? Why has there been no healthcare support for diabetic children? Nurses will have trained the classroom assistants to give support to those diabetic kids, so why are they not in school? It is OK for Education Authority staff to stay at home to protect themselves, but the kids need support in school and those staff are not there to help them.

Mr Murphy: I can answer those two points. First, as I understand it, the health trusts have been instructed to bring back all their engagement with schools on speech and language, psychology services and everything else. As I understand it, those were to begin in September. Again, staff are going to have a reduced capacity to deal with individuals because they will have to wear PPE and bring in other mitigations and controls given that they are coming in and out of various schools. However, the understanding from Health is that all its existing systems will be back and operational, and to the extent that we can do anything on that, we are relying on those people to do it.

A secondary issue here is understanding the difference between the systems of controls for reducing transmission. The Chief Medical Officer agreed our system for opening schools with all the individual controls and mitigations that we put in place. Those allow for a large number of people to get back into the workforce, for pupils to go back to school activity and for wider society to get back. On the other side of that, there are very strict controls on when we, as individuals, can meet. There is a balance here: you loosen up to allow schools to do things; and you bear down tight on everything else. That is the system that is in place across our society that has allowed schools, workforces and our health system etc to go on.

I understand. I work from home. I am working 24/7. I am working Saturdays and Sundays and everything else to get this done and to make the best of it. I entirely sympathise with our education community. However, the system has been put in place to allow schools to open up, and, on the other side of that, we are closing down and have held down restraints in other parts of society in order to control the overall rate of transmission. As you can see from England today, if the rate of transmission continues to increase, you get local lockdowns and closures. However, even with those local lockdowns, such as that in Bolton, which was announced yesterday, children are going to school.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Adrian. I appreciate your efforts.

Mr Murphy: Fundamentally, it is the same system in schools, but you have to lock down everything else to make it work.

Mr McNulty: I appreciate and recognise the efforts that you are all making and the stress that you are under. Teachers are saying that risk assessments are bureaucratic, cumbersome and very time-consuming to have to fill out every time there is a child who reports with any illness. They are too demanding of their time.

On COVID budgets, is there a pro rata budget for schools, plus a specific budget for schools where they might need one?

Mr Smith: In terms of what expenditure?

Mr McNulty: COVID. Schools have still not had a COVID budget allocated to them. Schools are paying bills with their own chequebooks without having an allocation to meet the demands that have been placed on them of additional cleaning regimes, additional staff and PPE. Is there a pro rata budget for schools with an additional budget where required?

Mr Smith: OK. This came up and received extensive discussion at this Committee last week. The EA is the funding authority for schools. The EA advised schools about the funding that was available to them on Wednesday 2 September. The allocations to schools of PPE and other COVID-19-related costs — excluding teacher substitution, which is dealt with slightly differently — are made on a per pupil basis. That is in line with other jurisdictions and reflects the funds that have been —.

Mr McNulty: I met principals last Wednesday morning. That has probably been superseded since, so thank you. They said that there is a financial crisis that will become an educational crisis, but I think that you have addressed that. On testing kits, teachers feel that, as they are not medics, they are not qualified to say who should get one and who should not. They are very concerned about the widening of the educational gap in terms of what we have already discussed with the unions that were represented earlier today. Continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers has also just been called to a halt.

There is one particular issue that I have raised on numerous occasions at this Committee, guys, but that I am not getting an answer on. It is very concerning, and Robin touched on it earlier. For too long in this society and on this island, vulnerable kids and vulnerable people have been left behind. I want to know what has been done proactively to ensure that no kid is unsafe in their home. There are

children who were unsafe in their homes throughout this pandemic and who had no escape in school because schools were closed down. How has that been proactively addressed by the Education Authority and DE? Give me the information. What has been done? What is the data?

Mr Smith: Vulnerable children in their own home is primarily an issue for health services and social services. We are focused on what goes on in schools in an educational context —.

Mr McNulty: Sorry, John. That does not wash. That is passing the buck. Society has a responsibility to ensure that no child is unsafe in their home. The Education Authority and DE have a role to play in that. It is not a question of saying, "That is a role for social services", or, "That is a role for the Department of Health". We all have a role to play here.

Mr Smith: That is a fair point, Justin. We discussed this point at Committee meetings before the summer. We work closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health on the emotional health and well-being framework. Multidisciplinary panel processes have been set up to assess vulnerable children's needs. Work is ongoing between the Department and the Health Department and the different agencies therein to take that forward. We will need to come back to you on the detail, but it is not something that we do not take seriously — we do. There are processes in place that we can come back to you with more detail on if we need to. We may have answered this earlier in the year, but we can relook at it and come back to you.

Mr McNulty: John, I am hearing again —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, I have to finish this up.

Mr McNulty: We need information on this, guys. I want to know that this is being proactively addressed within the Department and the EA. I want to know that that is happening.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks, Justin. I will say this to John and the Department on your behalf: to be fair to Justin, he raises this question at every single session. You might want to have a more detailed answer for him one of these days.

Mr Murphy: Fundamentally, the care of those children within the school environment is our responsibility within the education system. However, Health are the ones who will have a report on a child who is vulnerable. We, in the education system, will become aware of that only when that information is passed to us. To that extent, the Department of Health is the custodian of and the lead on that, and we will have to be guided by that Department on what we can do.

I understand, Justin, that you want to see us be proactive in managing that. One of the key things that we did at the very start was to make sure that, where schools were open for children of key workers, we included a definition whereby vulnerable children could be brought to school all the way through the initial stages of the pandemic. Vulnerable children were also brought in during the early phase of the reopening of schools so that schools could engage with them and their families, and they then became part of the normal engagement with the school as we rolled forward into September. It is not as if those children have been left behind. We have been looking at them, but it is Health-led fundamentally, and we will work with that Department on how we continue to support them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, thanks for your questions. I appreciate you continuing to raise that issue. As a Committee, we will want to continue to raise it, but we will have to stop at that point.

John, very quickly, you said that, in the funding mechanism, substitute teachers are dealt with differently. It has come to my attention that a criterion for accessing the funding available for sub teacher cover and for additional teacher cover is if a teacher in your school is off due to COVID. That funding is not available to increase the number of teachers at your school in order to improve the pupil:teacher ratio or to create smaller bubbles if you have extremely clinically vulnerable children. Why is that the case?

Mr Murphy: I cannot talk about the funding system, but it goes back to the fundamental premise of the controls and mitigations that are in place. The guidance from the Public Health Agency and the Chief Medical Officer is that our existing classrooms, our existing class sizes and the mitigations that we have in place are appropriate. We know that people will be off if they have tested positive or for precautionary isolation, and we want to cover that in the system to make sure that schools are not

affected by that, but it is not a back-door means to increase your classroom capacity to try to do anything else in the education system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am not suggesting that it is a back door. I am suggesting that it should be a front-door assistance to our schools. Just to be clear: DE is funding cover for teachers who are off due to COVID. It is providing no funding for any additional teaching human resource to try to improve class sizes or provide bespoke bubbles. It is purely to cover when a teacher is off due to COVID. You are providing no additional resource for additional teaching staff otherwise. Is that right?

Mr Smith: Chair, all I will say is that, with the fund for teacher-substitution costs, we have allocated the funding, it is being managed by the EA, and it will be allocated to schools based on verified costs. We will need to come back to you on the precise rules around that funding and what it is available to pay for, because that is the responsibility of the Education Authority and I do not have the answer to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So you do not know the criteria under which funding is being allocated for additional teaching resource in schools?

Mr Smith: No, I am not the finance director for the Department. As I said, the fund is being centrally managed by the EA, and if you need detail on the criteria for the fund and how it is managed, we will need to get back to you on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We are not trying to catch you out, John. The funding for additional teaching resource seems to be a fairly fundamental piece of additional resource that schools may need in order to reopen safely, to consider pupil:teacher ratios and to consider bespoke bubbles. Adrian said that the CMO and the PHA have said that all school classroom sizes are safe. The school guidance was based on a classroom size of 60 metres squared. There are classrooms across Northern Ireland that are nowhere near 60 metres squared.

Mr Murphy: The size of the individual classroom does not matter; what matters are the processes, systems and controls for basic hand hygiene coming in and out of the school, regular hand hygiene during the day, "Catch it, bin it, kill it" and normal cleaning processes being adopted. The system that is in place is the entirety of that. I was taught in a two-classroom school in the middle of Tyrone, with three individual classes in one room. Those classrooms still exist; they are very small and they will continue to be very small. The guidance is that social distancing can be relaxed among the individual pupils but that the staff should maintain social distancing where possible between the adults and the children. That is a sensible risk measure that controls the risk of mitigation here and means that the existing teaching process can continue as normal.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If you have 32 pupils with a teacher and two classroom assistants in a classroom that is 40 square metres, how can you maintain social distancing of any degree?

Mr Murphy: There is no expectation that you are able to maintain it. You are operating with a teacher and two classroom assistants, effectively, in a bubble. Even if one of them moved to another class, that operation is a safe way of doing it; you are reducing transmission by increasing segmentation and your basic hand hygiene. There is no expectation that you can maintain social distancing in every situation; that is impossible, just as it is in our wider society. It is about getting the balance between being able to open an active classroom and to engage in normal learning in a contained process. The containment is not at the individual level in a classroom; it is about the classroom level and creating a safe bubble. The bubble itself allows for teaching as normal.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is that the case regardless of the size of the bubble or whether there is an extremely clinically vulnerable pupil in it?

Mr Murphy: As I said, extremely clinically vulnerable pupils are treated as normal pupils as per the guidance from the PHA as of this week. That is the guidance that applies across the UK.

We have taken a classroom-based position on bubbles. Scotland has taken the position where entire year groups are bubbles. That is the position that has been taken in Holland and Denmark. France also uses classrooms. There are very different positions on what can be used. All are equally effective; you are reducing the number of possible transmissions. The smaller the bubbles, the better. You could break your classes down into three and hire two additional teachers, but the cost of that would be absolutely astronomical and would not have a real benefit in reducing transmission.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is helpful. There will not be additional funding to do that. That is clear. At least there is clarity on that.

Thanks very much indeed for your briefing today, folks. We will, obviously, engage with you on these issues on an ongoing basis. Thank you.