



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Restart:
Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education;
Department of Education;
Education Authority

7 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Mr Weir | Minister of Education |
| Ms Tina Dempster | Department of Education |
| Mr James Hutchinson | Department of Education |
| Mr Dale Hanna | Education Authority |
| Ms Arlene Kee | Education Authority |

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I remind Committee members that the Minister is scheduled to leave at noon, so every member will have approximately seven minutes for questions and answers.

We are joined by the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir MLA; Mr James Hutchinson, the Department of Education's Restart director; Ms Tina Dempster, the head of the Department's childcare strategy team; Mr Dale Hanna, the acting director of operations and estates at the Education Authority (EA); and Ms Arlene Kee, the Education Authority's assistant director of youth services. I remind all witnesses that the proceedings will be reported by Hansard. By way of welcome, I thank the Minister, his departmental officials and those from the Education Authority for attending today. Thank you for making yourselves available and for providing answers to queries that the Committee submitted about school restart.

As the public health situation developed during the summer, we hoped that the coronavirus pandemic would be under more control now than recent health statistics suggest. That is not the case, and there are challenging times ahead and important decisions to be made. I invite the Minister to make an opening statement of 10 to 15 minutes on the restart in schools and in other settings. That will be followed by questions from members.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I am delighted to be here. There is not a great deal of heat in the building at the moment, and we cannot even huddle together, so we are slightly at a loss.

To clarify, Chair, I have opening statements on youth settings, childcare and the broader Education Restart. Do you want me to take all three together? I am entirely in your hands as to how you want to handle it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. You have 10 to 15 minutes to cover all those, Minister.

Mr Weir: OK. I will go through each of the elements. I will begin with youth restart and then address childcare and the broader education situation.

As you indicated, we have with us officials from each of those elements. As you indicated, I am joined by Arlene Kee, who is the assistant director of youth services and is leading on Youth Restart. Of the three elements, this is probably the one in which the lead organisation has been the Education Authority more so than the Department. I will give you not only a little bit of background on the plans for the phased restart of generic youth services but a sense of the vital and exemplary work that is undertaken by our Youth Service in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. There is always a danger of forgetting about the great work that the voluntary sector is doing to support our young people at this challenging time.

I put on record my thanks to Arlene and her team and to the youth workers in the voluntary and statutory sectors for ensuring that services have remained available to our young people and for responding to their needs in what are incredibly challenging circumstances. Their efforts and dedication have ensured that the most vulnerable young people have continued to be supported throughout the pandemic. I am sure that the Committee will be at one with me in thanking our youth workers. The media focus has quite often been on schools. Some of the external communications might have given the impression that the work of Youth Service during the early stages of the pandemic and more recently are a lower priority for me and my Department. That is absolutely not the case. That impression is symptomatic of the lack of awareness sometimes of the vital role that Youth Service plays in the wider education arena and is something that I am keen to address.

Youth Service was amongst the first to operationalise an impressive and speedy response, not only by addressing the needs of the most vulnerable young people, including their physical and mental needs but by ensuring ongoing engagement with young people through Youth Online. That work has included the provision of food to those most in need through the Eat Well Live Well programme, which was a vital addition to the payments that were made. The fact that there was this tried and tested programme that was able to be deployed was of great advantage to the Executive and to society more widely. The work has also provided alternatives to antisocial and risk-taking behaviour and opportunities for young people to discuss mental health.

In response to the tensions that, unfortunately, inevitably arise during the summer period, I agreed, again with the permission of the Executive, that the EA could undertake a further series of work that included individual and small-group work. That was targeted, dedicated work with at-risk young people that was informed by the PSNI and on which there was cross-sectoral working. The EA has also delivered the usual planned intervention programmes through innovation means. Those are targeted at young people who are at greater risk of becoming involved in sectarian activities, civil disorder or other crimes during the summer when normally there are heightened community tensions. All of us can probably appreciate that, given the current circumstances and the broader frustration that is out there because of COVID, there was always a danger that temperatures could have boiled over much more easily.

I also gave permission for summer youth work activities. Those were delivered voluntarily by voluntary, community, private and uniformed organisations and took place until the end of September, as long as Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance was followed. That was essential to permissibility. All those services have undoubtedly been a lifeline for many of our young people and have kept them engaged and informed. That has impacted positively on not only their health and well-being but their readiness and ability to engage in both non-formal and formal education settings as those reopen. Further initiatives, such as the linking youth to new careers (LYNC) programme and a programme to address non-attendance at school, are also being developed by EA youth services. Arlene can talk about those in detail later in questions. It is also against that background that the EA, with my agreement, is undertaking planning of the restart of generic youth services, commencing in October on a phased basis.

Working with key stakeholders, including young people, has enabled the EA to understand the challenges faced by the sector directly and to respond accordingly. To ensure that that is done as safely as possible, comprehensive, specific youth sector guidance has been produced by the EA. Again, if there are questions on that, Arlene is probably in the best position to pick up on them. There is ongoing advice and funding available to organisations to help them address the challenges that they face. EA staff are also working on guidance on living with COVID-19 to build resilience in the youth sector. Indeed, as part of the overall well-being programme, a portion of the budget is set aside for the EA to deal with the youth side, although the focus has principally been on schools.

We recognise that no guidance can cover every issue. Specific questions emerge, and those are being addressed, with the sector being informed accordingly. As with other guidance, it is always being given in an evolving situation.

The EA has made £4.4 million of funding available to the sector through four support funding schemes, which focus on support for local youth restart, emotional health and well-being, regional restart membership and regional Youth Restart projects. In recognition of the additional costs incurred in the safe opening of youth services, my Department has produced an allocation of just under £1.4 million to the EA for PPE equipment for youth sector. Arlene will be able to add to that and answer any questions that you have. We are also happy to talk about outdoor centres. That is probably best picked up in response to questions.

I will move on to the childcare sector. I appreciate that you want to cover all these points at the start. The Committee will be aware of the initial actions that were taken through the childcare support scheme. To date, there have been two schemes. The initial one appeared from April until June, and a total of £2.8 million was paid out from that. A small number of queries are still outstanding, however, so there will potentially be some additional costs, particularly as a few appeals are pending. It is undoubtedly the case that there were some problems with that scheme, albeit its focus was principally to provide a level of support to childcare settings that were closed. You could call it a cheaper option, but it was one that, largely speaking, enabled those childcare settings to keep their head above water. Lessons were learned from that, and, as a result, the childcare recovery programme followed for July and August. The latest update is that £9.3 million of the £10.5 million has been allocated to date. Costs are not yet finalised. The Committee previously received a paper on a little additional funding for childminders, and that forms part of the overall amount.

At this stage, no further funding has been provided to the Department for the period from September to December. Work, however, is ongoing among Department of Health officials, DE officials and childcare sector representatives. The childcare group as a whole has been a very useful vehicle for various stakeholders. We are trying to scope out what could be faced during that period. We continue to bid for funding from the Executive. I suppose that further tranches of money will be made available through COVID funding. That, however, is a wider decision for the Executive to take, so we cannot guarantee it.

Guidance and support has been supplied to parents and providers. We provide the policy side of childcare, but a lot of the regulations are made by the Department of Health. That Department has continued to update and publish guidance in line with the public health advice. That guidance is kept under continuous review. The reference group continues to meet to ensure that the information is available to parents and providers. Positive case studies and reflections from parents have been shared by the reference group's members on social media. Despite some of that, we know that some childcare providers have had to close in recent weeks following confirmed cases of COVID-19. Work will continue with our health colleagues on seeking advice from the PHA and on dealing with issues coming from the childcare reference group on operational implications.

I will finish my comments on childcare by making a brief comment on the Executive childcare strategy. Some of the information has already been supplied to the Committee in a paper that it received. Wearing another hat, I can say that we have had very good engagement with the all-party group on early education and childcare, where we delved into some of the issues. There has been useful learning from the past few weeks, and that will help shape our plans for the longer term, when work on the strategy can recommence.

We are conscious that a significant period has passed since the discontinuation of work on the draft childcare strategy. In taking on board some of the useful learning since March, I can say that discussions are under way on looking at innovation labs with key stakeholders early in the new year. To some extent, the exact timing will probably be determined by the wider health position. We hope to move on that as soon as possible in the new year, however.

Finally, I will talk about the school restart programme. The programme was established to manage, process and support effectively the phased reopening of our schools, and it is now well established. The reopening was led by medical and scientific advice to ensure that it was done in a manner and to a timescale that was safe for pupils, staff and wider society, and that continues to the case. The pathway to recovery followed the route outlined for the education sector in 'Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making'. The programme worked alongside a wide range of stakeholders to co-design a series of detailed measures and guidance to provide a flexible framework in order to have a safe phased reopening of schools. It has undoubtedly been the case that there has had to be a level of trade-off in trying to ensure that we have informed guidance that we can consult as much as we can, and we can be criticised either way for that trade-off. The other criticism is that things arrived late in the day. This is about trying to strike a balance between the two.

There are three restart strands. The Education Restart strand is considering all matters central to the restart of education in schools and other settings, including preschools, nurseries, education other than at school (EOTAS), in a safe and effective manner. The DE restart strand considers all matters central to restarting the Department, including an exit plan for the restart programme. The lessons learned in preparedness strand considers just that.

As part of the programme, a number of priorities were identified. Some of this will overlap with comments that I have already made. The priorities are physical protection; well-being; special educational needs (SEN); vulnerable learners; standards in learning; New School Day, which was the focus for most people; and childcare. The Education Restart web page is now active and provides guidance and information for education settings, parents, carers, children and young people. To ensure that all users can access the information available, the page signposts information on partner websites such as the EA website and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) website.

Further to that, the programme has worked to develop a comprehensive communication plan and recognisable Education Restart branding. That is there to support schools. The practitioners' group, trade union side (TUS) and the sectoral body consultation group that was set up in March have had regular meetings throughout. The publication of revised guidance is not the end of the process. We are in constant discussions. To some extent, it is not simply about what happens, broadly speaking, within education, but we will be subject, in that broader sense, to wider changes. How the Department of Health views things may sometimes differ from period to period.

The New School Day guidance for restart was published on 19 June. It was always envisaged that it would be subject to prevailing public medical health provision. A revised version was published on 13 August. As has been indicated throughout, the aim of bringing schools back in full has been achieved, but this is not a return to normal. Key elements in the New School Day guidance focus on enhanced hygiene, cleaning methods, social distancing, best spacing and protective bubbles. It is a strategic document that was originally designed for day one, but, again, we are in an evolving situation.

Officials have been liaising with the Department of Health and the PHA on testing. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has rolled out a programme to provide COVID testing kits to all schools in England, and those arrangements have been extended to the devolved Administrations. That offer is open to every school, which will get a box containing 10 individual home-testing kits. Given where we are at this stage with technology, the idea is not to do direct testing on-site. Doing so would place our schools in a difficult position.

In the medium term to long term, the focus is likely to switch from the impact of the disruption, but, first, we have to assess the educational impact of loss of learning and develop appropriate interventions. The launch of the support mechanism through the Engage programme, funded by the Department, provides that.

We are awaiting sign-off of the business case, but, in addition to the interventions that had been planned anyway for stepping up on mental health and well-being, there is specific funding of £5 million as part of the restart programme. We will soon be able to announce that direct funding for schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, that is 15 minutes, so I have to ask you to come to a close.

Mr Weir: I have about three paragraphs to go.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Weir: We will continue to work. There will always be bumps along the road, so this is about trying to cope with where we are at and, where we can, scope ahead, be responsive and provide information. Undoubtedly, not everything will go entirely smoothly, but we have seen a strong return to school and particularly strong buy-in. I place on record again my thanks, particularly to the leadership and staff in schools. It is also clear that there has been strong buy-in and a desire from parents and children for a return to school.

The importance of education, as well childcare and youth services, has been acknowledged by the Department. I will take one example. It was accepted by the Executive that, when particular measures were being put in place in the north-west, that was being done on the basis of schools and childcare settings remaining open and, given their importance, managed youth settings getting support.

I have gone a little bit over time, but, as you will appreciate, with three subjects, there was a lot to cover. I and the team are happy to answer any questions

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thank you, Minister. I echo your acknowledgement of the role played by teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and pupils across Northern Ireland in getting our education system restarted. Key to school restart and control of the transmission of coronavirus in our schools, and therefore in our community, is a prompt and efficient response to symptomatic and COVID-positive cases, isolation of those cases, and contact tracing and testing. How many teachers have been or are COVID-positive?

Mr Weir: We are working on that. There were meetings yesterday about that with the PHA. The PHA has the direct figures, and it is working with us so that it can provide the figures to us and the Education Committee in as accurate and fair a way as possible. We do not want to be giving out either inaccurate or misleading figures. There have been surveys of children and teachers who are in school, and we have had a very strong response from the numbers that have been in.

We know from the PHA that, where community transmission has taken place, there may be a knock-on effect in schools, where either a child or a member of staff has got it. Broadly speaking, the PHA is confident that there have not been significant levels of transmission in schools. Where, however, for example, a teacher has tested positive, it has sometimes been the case that, from a social point of view, some of the restrictions have limited further spread. In such cases, the vulnerability is that some of that teacher's colleagues will have had to self-isolate as a result. The PHA is working on figures at present, because we want to provide something that is accurate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, as you will appreciate, there is a raft of questions to get through, so we will have to keep answers concise. Do you know how many teachers have been or are COVID-positive?

Mr Weir: We will get you the figures once the PHA is in a position to release them in a meaningful way.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Have you not asked for the figures? Do you not need to know that information?

Mr Weir: Look, I told you that we are working with the PHA. They are PHA figures. There is no point in releasing figures that may be inaccurate. It is a situation that evolves every day.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I presume therefore that you do not know how many P7 teachers are COVID-positive? No?

Mr Weir: I said that we would get you the figures, so there is no point in trying to ask that. We are working with the PHA so that the figures can be presented in an accurate and useful manner to the Committee and more generally. We are not going to drill down into individual classes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that. We look forward to receiving those figures. Part of the question is genuinely to find out whether you have asked and whether you know. It is slightly concerning if you have not asked.

Mr Weir: With respect, we are meeting regularly on the detail; in fact, officials met the PHA and the Department of Health yesterday. We will provide the figures. We are not in a position to release the figures, so I will not get into drilling down into the detail.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So you do not know, for example, how many teachers have been or are self-isolating either.

Mr Weir: Again, it is a variable feast. There are opportunities for substitute teachers, and that is what part of the funding is for. The numbers will vary from day to day. Indeed, some of the disruption that happened in a couple of schools was because of the impact not on children but on teachers. There have been schools that have taken action to close a form or close the school, with it then taking a day or two to put arrangements in place. Sometimes that has been because the virus has hit a principal or vice principal, resulting in a break in the leadership chain. We have worked with schools that have been in that situation. I am not going to get into the figures until the PHA is in a position to provide accurate figures.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You will not know how many pupils have been self-isolating either.

Mr Weir: We know from the levels of attendance. The normal process for recording pupil absences is based on overall annual pupil attendance. To compare like with like, in previous years, those figures have been captured annually and are usually 94% to 95%. Overall pupil attendance has varied between about 91.3% and 95.5%, and we monitor that on a weekly basis. Similarly, teacher attendance has been hitting around 95%, and there is that element of teachers being missing for normal reasons to consider within that.

Those are probably the most relevant attendance figures. Again, we are trying to ensure that the latest advice from the PHA about the people who should self-isolate is followed. Schools will have a certain flexibility in what they do in particular circumstances, but there is clear guidance on who should self-isolate when there are cases.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Close contacts of COVID-positive cases, for example, are required to self-isolate for 14 days, so that is two weeks of school being missed. Do you not know how many pupils are missing two weeks of school?

Mr Weir: It means that those pupils will not be in school. On the same basis as during the spring term, however, there is an onus on the school to provide remote learning for those children where there are gaps in their education. Everyone accepts and all of us are of the view that we must ensure that school is as regular and normal as possible, as remote learning is never as good as being taught directly in the classroom.

Yes, close contacts are defined in the PHA guidance that schools have. Barring very unusual circumstances, we should not really see whole schools closing, unless it is for a day or two for a deep clean or to reorganise staffing.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): As of today, you are not even able to tell us to what extent schools are being affected in terms of attendance.

Mr Weir: We can get you the figures for overall school attendance. The point is that you could pluck out a figure for the number of schools that, on any particular occasion or over a period of time, have been impacted, but that impact might be one child being off or a whole form being off. It is about ensuring that the data is provided in a meaningful manner. If you are looking at it from a global level, the variations in patterns of attendance are probably the critical aspect. Those have been relatively close; they have been a little bit below what the normal figures are likely to be, although we cannot make a complete like-for-like comparison. They show that the vast majority of schools and children are still in. One anticipates that, even in normal circumstances, you would probably have a higher level of absentee rate or absence —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, but —

Mr Weir: — during an autumn term than you would necessarily have in the summer.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We need to move on, Minister, but you cannot have expected that you were going to come to the Education Committee today and we were not going to ask you for a detailed brief on the nature of school attendance or absence, or the COVID-positive —

Mr Weir: The Committee —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — rate of pupils in school.

Mr Weir: The Committee is entitled, obviously, to ask anything that it wants in relation to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Weir: We have an onus to work with the PHA. The PHA will have those figures. It is about ensuring that, when figures are supplied, they are absolutely accurate and are of value to the Committee and to others.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Are you content with the level —

Mr Weir: The point has been made.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — of assistance that schools are getting to do quite significant scales of contact tracing as a result of COVID-positive and symptomatic cases?

Mr Weir: The process is that, where somebody tests positive, the school has to draw up a list of those who have been in close contact. Close contact is very clearly defined within that now.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I do not need a detailed breakdown —

Mr Weir: Then they will pass it —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — of how to do it. I understand —

Mr Weir: And then they will pass that on —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — how to do it. I want to know whether you are content with the assistance that schools are getting to do it.

Mr Weir: With respect, the idea is that schools themselves will be able to determine who a close contact is. It is the school's role to pass that on to the PHA. The PHA then does the contact tracing; it is not —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No, schools are having to do that themselves, Minister. They are conducting contact tracing. Are you content with the —

Mr Weir: No, their — sorry, their aim —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — scale of workload that that requires of them?

Mr Weir: Their aim is to draw up the contact tracing list. The testing side of things is for the PHA.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is testing, not contact tracing.

Mr Weir: There is a delineation of roles in that regard.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Quickly, with regard to clinically vulnerable children and children with clinically vulnerable family members at home, the clinically vulnerable children school restart guidance stated that they would get assistance from a health professional with regards to whether it was suitable for them to return to school. Do you know how many children are in that category? Are they largely at special schools? What percentage of them are awaiting assessment? What support are they getting if they cannot attend school? Are those clinically vulnerable children —

Mr Weir: This is where —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — getting the help and assistance that they need to either be at school or receive assistance at home?

Mr Weir: We are working with Health on that. Dale, do you have anything?

Mr Dale Hanna (Education Authority): The only figure that I can give you around that is for children who require aerosol-generating procedures. This week, there are still 18 pupils whom we are working on trying to get into school. The vast majority of them are in special education schools. The figure last week was 23, so we are working our way through that, and it is coming down. I do not have a figure for the other medical conditions —.

Mr Weir: And the position, broadly speaking, as regards special schools — and it is the normal situation — is that, very understandably, attendance tends to be a little bit lower than that in mainstream schools. Currently, it is running at around 2% below what it would normally be.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. In terms of children who have a clinically vulnerable family member at home who were to have a risk assessment done in order to return to school, it is my understanding that Health is not required to assist with that risk assessment. How has that situation worked out?

Mr Weir: We will be working with Health to try to resolve any outstanding issues.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Minister, do you accept that there has been a fairly widespread rejection of your January rescheduling of post-primary transfer tests?

Mr Weir: I am not quite sure where that fits in to Restart, but, if you want to ride that hobby horse, I am happy to do so. The reality is that there is a balance to be struck. First of all, with regard to dates, I want to make this absolutely clear. I am sure that you are very well aware of this, but the dates are set by the transfer test providers. They are not a direct issue for the Department. Our role is to ensure that whenever transfer, in any form —. This applies to both those who are taking the test and those who are not. Our role is, from that point, to be able to process that, while working alongside our colleagues in the EA, to ensure that that can happen in a timely manner, which can then ensure that everybody is in place for their new school for the new school term.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I am happy for you to say —

Mr Weir: From that point of view —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — if you disagree with the question that I am asking rather than giving a long answer, but I am obviously going to ask the questions. It is my understanding that you had drafted a ministerial direction for EA to change their timetable around post-primary transfer administration —

Mr Weir: No, what —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — so I find it hard to see how having no role in this process stacks up with that.

Mr Weir: Sorry. The Department's role —. As you know from the court case, we indicated that we explored with EA, first of all, what timetables were doable in that regard, because while the choice is ultimately for the test providers, there is no point in a timetable being provided which simply cannot be processed. It became clear from that that we were in a position, as a result of that, in which tests could either happen on a timescale before Christmas or shortly after Christmas. The key, irrespective of anything, is to ensure that we can ensure that every child is processed, and that appeals are able to take place as well, so that we are not left in the new academic year with people being —. That is the right thing. The choice in relation to the dates —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The administration —.

Mr Weir: The reality is that, whatever dates are there, it is incumbent on us and the EA to ensure that there is delivery of that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I understand. OK. The process is going to have to be nine weeks faster than normal. What are the additional costs for that nine-week-shorter timescale?

Mr Weir: I think that you are inaccurate with regard to your figures. I think that it is actually about a six-week period with regard to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, six weeks; thanks for the correction.

Mr Weir: And, of that, where they think —. There will be some changes which were going to be happening anyway in EA with regard to the digitalisation of the process.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so no cost.

Mr Weir: And, of that time frame, I think there are — effectively, the change, from an EA and wider educational point of view, is effectively five weeks with regard to turnaround from the test providers, which — without this happening, I think that the time frames would not have been able to be met — is on the basis of them taking a shorter period of time for the processing of the tests themselves by —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so no additional cost to the public purse for this shift?

Mr Weir: Oh, there will be some level of additional costs in trying to make sure that things move more rapidly. Some of those things were things that were going to be happening anyway with regard to that. To be honest —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I presume I am not going to get the additional costs, so I am happy to move on.

Mr Weir: — the more that we can make this a process in which things move as quickly and as seamlessly as possible is in everyone's interest, and that is true whether you are or are not doing the test. The important thing is to actually move P7 pupils —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK —.

Mr Weir: — on to year 8 in as seamless a way as possible.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. For schools that have decided not to use academic selection in their admissions process, do you believe that that is a significant change?

Mr Weir: We are finalising advice after having taken some legal advice with regard to that, so the information on that will be made clear to those schools fairly shortly in that regard. That will become clear but, because we have taken a level of legal advice, I think that the schools themselves should be informed of the situation before there is any other action taken —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When did you receive the legal advice?

Mr Weir: Well, we have got that. There were certain actions that we have had to take on foot of the legal advice, which we are just finalising, so I anticipate that we will probably be in a position to be able to clarify the situation with the schools in the next week or so.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So, within the next week, you will be telling the schools whether or not you think that that is a significant change?

Mr Weir: Yes, that is the intention. We are working through the final elements of that at present. However, as I have said, as it is on the foot of legal advice and as there have maybe been a couple of cases where the issue is a little bit greyer than others, we are having to work through those. I think that we will be in a position with that, Chair, to be able to give that information in the next week or so.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If you deem it to be a significant change, there will obviously be a string of extremely serious questions to answer that we will wish to return to, further to publication of that legal advice. I will not go down that road today.

Mr Weir: That is obviously hypothetical at this stage, so we will see what transpires.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It certainly is. OK, I will bring in Karen Mullan, the Deputy Chair.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, Dale, Arlene and Tina for attending this morning. First, I have two questions on the Youth Service, so I will put those together. I commend the excellent ongoing work through the Youth Service, the Education Authority and our community and voluntary sector provision. Minister, you gave an outline of an update in relation to generic youth services reopening on a phase-based approach in October. Will that be the same in Derry and Strabane, given the new restrictions there?

Mr Weir: It should be —. Sorry, maybe you want to get the other question in first.

Ms Mullan: The other one is a quick one. We had correspondence in from the Uniform Youth Work Hub, and it is unclear about guidance and is asking for clarity around educational visits. Have educational visits to outdoor and residential settings been paused?

Mr Weir: Let me deal with the two aspects. The situation in Derry and Strabane may not be absolutely identical, but it should be similar. I made it very clear that youth services, whenever we were —. I do not want to breach too much directly, but I think that it was accepted by everybody on the Executive that the protections that had to be put in place and the exemptions from restrictions that are there in education and childcare should also cover managed youth settings in Derry and Strabane. It is also the case that it is not just a localised issue there. What happens in the first instance may well be replicated in other locations, and I think that everybody in the Executive accepted the importance of youth settings. The position on the guidance is that managed youth settings, which can cover, broadly speaking, a fairly generic definition of that, are within those things. From that point of view, I do not believe that there should be any major difference.

Specifically as regards outdoor centres and the educational visits, we have worked initially on the suggestion that these would resume from January. I felt that that was too far away, so I have given indications to EA that those should resume by the end of October. The only thing that that will be subject to —. We are still awaiting a final verdict from PHA and DOH. The other factor that members should be aware of is that we are keen to get those resumed. The Educational Centres Association, which operates in the four nations of the United Kingdom, is looking at an overall suggestion of towards January. We would like to see that resumed here earlier than that, but that will depend on getting a green light at the end of October from the PHA, the Department of Health and the Chief Medical Officer. Arlene, is there anything that you want to add to that?

Ms Arlene Kee (Education Authority): That is a good summary. Karen, we met the youth providers in Derry and Strabane at 6.00 pm on the evening that the new restrictions were put in place to scenario-build, problem-solve and give guidance and advice. The voluntary and community sector is very clear that it wants to support vulnerable children and young people. It wants to meet the needs of those young people, and we have very good processes in place of ongoing support scenario planning to enable that sector to progress. The same stands for our own statutory services, so we are standing up services this week, and we are ensuring that our young people are protected. There were two key things that were important to take on board. First, parents asked why Youth Service in Derry and Strabane should be open when some of the community sector and some of the council provision was closed. There was a bit of a concern around the visibility of that. We have addressed that now. We have provided a pack for parents so that they understand that children are safe and that we are about, as the Minister said, education and ensuring that personal social development in our programmes is central to that work. We have the provision in place to ensure that there is ongoing guidance and advice and that young people are provided for in your area.

Mr Weir: We are conscious that Youth Service cannot simply be a forgotten element or something just to the side in relation to the provisions that are made.

Ms Mullan: Of course, Minister, and it is good that you have brought Arlene along today, because the sector has been feeling it for a long time and it was rectified a while back. A lot of the planning was

going into schools, and rightly so, at the time. Great work has been done by Arlene and her team. Young people have missed out on so much, so it is good to hear that it is being managed in a safe way and that we can provide services if it is safe to do so. Thank you both for that update.

Minister, the Chair has covered quite a bit, but I just want to go back on some of the stuff. This is all moving very fast. In particular, I have touched on Derry and Strabane. At the same time, we continue to see sporadic school closures, the withdrawal of class bubbles and more and more pupils self-isolating. Chris had asked about the figures. It is difficult for us to see the level of attendance when the most recent update that has been provided from your Department was 14 September. My daughter, who is in year 12, is off for the third time now, isolating for 14 days. She is a pupil who has had 100% attendance throughout her whole school life, and you can imagine how worried and concerned we are. This is being replicated right across. I am very concerned about the prospect of GCSEs and A levels for next year and the uncertainty that that is going to bring.

Minister, we are now in our second month. What work is ongoing around remote learning and ensuring that there is a level playing field for young people? You know that I have been raising this issue since March in relation to being connected, and great work has been done by the Department. Yesterday, I was told that one of our local post-primary schools has submitted its request for laptops and is still waiting, two weeks later. That means that some children are at home isolating without access to learning. We need contingency planning ramped up in this regard, and your Department must ensure equality of access to the curriculum for all young people. There are two parts to that. I have already asked the first part; the second part is will you look at widening the criteria for the IT equipment support from what is there at the minute? Many parents are still on furlough, incomes are reduced, and more and more parents will be losing their jobs or have less income coming in. We have already seen that, particularly in my area. Sorry, that is long-winded.

Mr Weir: There has been a considerable number of devices provided. If there is a specific problem at a school, Karen, if you notify us of that, we will chase that up. We are also in discussions this week, via some contacts we have, which can hopefully widen the pool of devices. There will be discussions in the next few days on that.

You are right about the broader issue of ensuring that, particularly for *[Interruption.]* I suppose it is appropriate that we are dealing with the challenges of technology here on that side of things. There are a couple of issues. There is the issue of remote devices, which we are looking at widening the scope of. As part of that, an additional business case has been put in with DOF to see if some capital can be shifted into digital devices in connection with that. One of the challenges where we have had to drill down a bit with schools around the PHA advice has been —. Understandably, there has also been a reaction sometimes where schools have seen a case to throw the net very wide around those who are self-isolating, whereas the advice should be a little bit more limited on the number of children. We are working with schools in relation to that and, hopefully, drawing that back in. There is no doubt that there will be a level of disruption, and we are trying to ensure that there is support to manage it, but you are right: it will be bumpy, and I appreciate the position that your daughter is in.

That will also mean that whenever a decision will be taken around — which, again, will be finalised in the next few days — some of the issues around particularly the GCSE and A level side, a level of scope will be put in place. We cannot expect — or, at least, it is not unreasonable, for the most part, to expect — the level of content that would be covered in a normal year to necessarily be reflected fully.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, I need to stop you there. We are in danger of taking far too long here on the answers. Karen, are you content?

Ms Mullan: Just one last one, Chair, if you do not mind.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It needs to be very brief. Before that, Minister, how many laptops have been given out? If you do not know the answer, that is fine; just say. I think that is what Karen is trying to get at.

Mr Weir: I think Karen put in a question in on that. Off the top of my head, about 6,700 —.

Mr Hanna: I can answer that.

Mr Weir: Oh, sorry. Apparently Dale has —.

Mr Hanna: I have some information here in front of me. For stage 3, in total, 7,500 devices have been allocated across the system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When you say "allocated", does that mean "given to schools"?

Mr Weir: I think that the figure for being directly distributed is somewhere in the region of 6,700. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I know that yesterday —. Karen had put in a similar question for written answer, which was signed off on yesterday. There is a small gap between those that have been obtained and those that have been allocated. There is a small gap between the two, but I would say that about 90% have been allocated.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We are in danger of being way over time. Karen, a very brief supplementary question, please.

Ms Mullan: I suppose I have gathered it from the answers given so far, and I have touched on the situation in Derry and Strabane, but what extra support is your Department giving in Derry and Strabane to local school leaders to be able to deal with the restrictions and high levels of people off isolating?

Mr Weir: Do not forget that it will have to be across the board, because where we are within that area will be, to some extent, a little bit of variation of what is happening in other areas, and other areas will come up in relation to it. So there is more general support. Do not forget it is also the case that schools are to remain open. To be fair, that is probably fairly generic across all jurisdictions. If you look South or east, you will find a similar position.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the Committee. I also thank you for reacting positively to requests from boards of governors and principals to visit schools in East Belfast. That is greatly appreciated by those principals and boards of governors. All members of the Committee should place on record our thanks to the principals and all the staff working in partnership with parents and enabling the successful return of schools.

On a personal note, I echo your words, Minister, on the work of the Youth Service. I applaud the work that it has done in this very difficult situation. I have had discussions with principals and vice-principals, and those have been around the increasing amount of work that principals, vice-principals and senior staff have to do with those who have missed out on the protective environment of a school over the period of the lockdown and the return. I want to ask about a developing, emerging or additional relationship that, I believe, is necessary to support principals in addressing the difficult situation of some young children. Is there an emerging or developing relationship with Health in addressing the needs of those children?

Mr Weir: To address their needs, we made two interventions, one of which has been rolled out, and the other will soon be there. There is specific funding for the academic needs of the Engage programme, and that is about £11.2 million. That followed on from smaller initiatives over the summer. However, there are big concerns. As well as meeting, at various times, with principals, I met some groups, for example, Action Mental Health and Guide Dogs for the Blind to discuss specific needs. There is a range of specific groups. We are signing off the final business case for that £5 million recovery programme on mental health and well-being, which impacts very considerably on some of those needs. There is, obviously, a role for Health as well. That will work alongside a range of initiatives that are being considered in the wider mental health and well-being framework, which will be mainstreamed throughout a number of years. We are keen to work with individuals. Relatively soon, I will be meeting a group of school principals shortly in Derry, rather than specifically in East Belfast.

Mr Newton: I was thinking of the relationship between the family intervention teams and schools. School principals have indicated to me that they are finding, more and more, that they need to spend time on these issues. They seek a greater, stronger involvement between the family intervention team and the school.

Mr Weir: If we need to be a conduit to facilitate that better relationship, we will be happy to do so.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister. It is good to see Dale, Arlene and Tina. I, too, want to put on record my sincerest appreciation to Arlene and her team for the great work they do for youth service

across Northern Ireland, and for the assistance kindly offered to me as the Assembly Member for West Tyrone in recent times. I thank Dale's office as well, which has assisted me over the last few weeks.

I will jump straight into my questions, Minister. The Engage money was allocated according to a formula devised by your Department. Are you aware that this formula managed to allocate two primary schools, in the same small town, the same amount of money? One school has almost three times the enrolment of the other and has close to a 20% higher social deprivation rate. One school has 250 pupils, the other 750. The net result is that one school can spend the equivalent of slightly over £100 per child, while the other has only £36 per child. Will you tell us how both schools can equally address the ravages of COVID-19 on their respective children with such differing budgets? This is not the only example that I can cite from the numbers across Northern Ireland. Your allocation of funding is riven with similar discrepancies across the country, and, as a consequence, children will not be supported fairly. Do you agree that the formula is a mess?

Mr Weir: No, is the short answer, when we get the figures right. I was going to say that it is good to see you back in the flesh.

There may well be some administrative error. There is banding in the Engage programme, and I do not believe that two schools, one of 250 pupils and one of 750, particularly if they are roughly in the same position as regards free school meals, should be in the same band. It seems that there has been an error.

We had levels of banding where a higher figure went to schools that had above-average free school meals entitlement, which is 28%. Within that, there was a banding on the basis of the size of the schools. That is so that schools were not left entirely without support. For, those that were below the average free school meals entitlement, the position was such that it should be —. Sorry. Let me correct that a little bit. Within the banding, an allocation would be made. The reality is that this was to provide levels of support that could be out there. We could have spent a lot longer devising a scheme, but the idea was to get money out to schools as quickly as possible, and a banding system happens in a number of other cases. This is additional support, and the freedom is given to the schools to apply that money, so I do not believe that it is a mess. Whatever system you put in place, it can always be argued that it is fairer to some than to others. There is no perfect solution, but this is a way of getting that money out directly to schools in a way that means that they can spend it quickly on additional intervention and substitute cover.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, first of all, thank you for your well wishes and also for them when I was off. I am sure that you have missed me.

Mr Weir: Words cannot describe how much I have missed you, Danny.

Mr McCrossan: I would believe that.

You mentioned some figures, and I am familiar with some schools. I will not name them, but one of them has a much lower social-deprivation rate than the other, and, incidentally, it turns out to be the school with the smaller number of pupils. I have looked through the figures and have used my own constituency because of my local knowledge. How can a school with 750 pupils get the same level of funding as a school with 250 pupils, but, when it comes to the figure per head — per pupil — there is a massive contrast? I know that the school with 250 pupils has a lower rate of social deprivation and a lower rate of free school meals than that of the much larger primary school. I know that this issue will be raised with me because I raised it at this Committee in previous weeks and said that this would be the case.

Mr Weir: Daniel, we wanted something that could get money to schools quickly, and we wanted a formula that had a level —.

Sorry, I should correct something that I said earlier. In terms of the bands for free school meal entitlement, yes, there is a banding that is above 200 and goes up to 1,000. The idea was to provide blocks of money so that schools could then, for example, get one full-time equivalent or half a full-time equivalent, rather have 1,000 different rates for doing that. We made a differentiation and said that there would be a higher level of funding for schools that qualified, and it is quite often the case with government funding that you pass a qualification threshold and then receive a certain amount of money. It was done on the basis of above-average free school meal entitlement, and "above-average" means schools that have 28% or more free school meal entitlement. When the signature project was

rolled out a number of years ago, it concentrated on schools that had a higher level of free school meal entitlement. You will get some disparity or anomalies, but this was to ensure that there was a level of support for everyone.

Mr McCrossan: Minister —.

Mr Weir: One of the criticisms previously was that schools that fell below that 28% or below the average free school meal entitlement were getting nothing, so we have a lower band level of support, which means that that equates to equivalent numbers of additional substitute cover or additional intervention, and that can still happen in areas where there is a lower level of social deprivation.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I appreciate your answer, and I also appreciate that funding has been allocated to schools, but I have a concern — I do not have time to continue on this today — that, although the two primary schools in my local area have a significant difference in numbers, one school will receive £100 per head, which is significantly different from £36 per head, and I do not know how I will justify or explain that to the principal of each school. The principals have the same circumstances to tackle, but one has much larger numbers to deal with.

Mr Weir: The only alternative would be a bespoke solution for all 1,000 schools in Northern Ireland, through which they would all receive different amounts, and you would have an argument about to what extent, within that formula, you provide weighting for free school meals in terms of social deprivation and to what extent you reflect the numbers that are there. To get something in place to enable schools to start spending that money from towards the end of September onwards, and if you were to devise a scheme that was, effectively, bespoke for each school, that would not realistically be in place before the school year.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, we appreciate the complexity of the situation and the challenges that COVID has brought, but I am simply pointing out a very simple fact that will be fired at each of us very soon in our respective constituencies or in our spokesperson roles. The two bands that have been considered on this occasion are much too crude and will disproportionately affect one school over another.

Mr Weir: Strictly speaking, there are four separate bands of free school meals. There is then a separate bit —.

Mr McCrossan: Sorry, the number 4 band.

Mr Weir: Sorry?

Mr McCrossan: The number 4 band, rather than 2, would have been much better. That is what I was saying.

Mr Weir: There are four separate bands of free school meals. There are also non-free-school-meal bands, so, effectively, you could say that there is the equivalent of seven bands.

If you were to start to disaggregate that a lot more, as I said, you would —. Again, you either have a situation in which something is bespoke for every school, or you have some level of banding. If you have banding, you will always get criticism when people fall either side of the band, and we have seen that happening. If you are going to do something bespoke and that uses a certain formula in devising, administering and sending that out, I think —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We will come back to that. I want to get one final question from Daniel.

Mr Weir: The point has been made.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister. Again, I appreciate that it is a complicated situation.

I want to touch on the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), as I have done before. DE recently provided correspondence to the Committee, which we appreciate. That included CCEA's advice to you on 5 April 2020 about grade-awarding options. CCEA's recommendations for GCSEs, AS levels and A levels appear to match the grade-awarding models that

were adopted prior to 17 August 2020. It is understood that you provided a second formal direction to CCEA on 12 May 2020. Can you confirm that that direction required CCEA to adopt the recommended grade-awarding models for GCSEs, AS levels and A levels that were later abandoned on 17 August 2020? If you decided those grading models in May, why were they not published or shared with the Committee or, indeed, anyone else, prior to 17 August 2020? Finally, why has your Department directed CCEA not to pay examiners, moderators and invigilators, and have you directed CCEA to repay all exam fees?

There are a number of things there, Minister, but it is mainly about the advice that was received. That is critical because we need to know and establish who was directing who when it came to the awarding of grades that caused a huge amount of hurt to students.

Mr Weir: I and other Ministers in other jurisdictions received advice about what the awarding models should be for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs. I got my advice from CCEA. As they did in the other jurisdictions, I took that advice and agreed with it.

Ultimately, I am the person who takes responsibility and makes the decisions. The word "direction" maybe gives the impression that I did something that was contrary to CCEA's advice. It was not a question of me imposing something on CCEA. I take responsibility for that because the reality is that any solutions that we came up with were not going to be perfect.

Final advice is yet to be received about any reimbursement of students or schools.

Examiners have been paid for the work that they have done. We got legal advice that indicated that, with examiners, invigilators and moderators, there is, effectively, a contract for services, and payment should only be made where those services were provided. People have been paid for all the preparation work that took place. Legally, we would have been in a situation in which we were paying people when they had no entitlement to that money and in which the work had not been done because of circumstances that were outside of our control.

The initial suggestion was that a particular group of top examiners — about 1,600 examiners — would be paid but that others would not. Legally, that would be indefensible, and we got advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office on the way forward. That advice pointed to a direction that, legally, the safest option, from any form of challenge, would be that groups should be treated equally and that, indeed, there was no entitlement for anybody to be paid. Also, the overall cost of paying everybody would be an extra £4 million, which is not in the budget.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I appreciate your answering that question. I would have liked more details on the advice to or from CCEA, but I want to touch on the examiners. It is a very topical issue, and it has been raised with us. Are the advice that you have received and the direction of travel that you have taken to paying examiners different from those in Scotland, Wales and England?

Mr Weir: I am not sure of the detail of that, but we obtained legal advice directly from the Departmental Solicitor's Office in connection with that. It may well be that the precise set-up in those jurisdictions is different, but here, examiners and invigilators and those who work below examiners, are employed on the basis of a contract for services. They are not employees. The legal advice was that there is no entitlement to pay beyond that for work that has already been done. Roughly speaking, examiners have received about £1 million because of all the preparation work that had to be done, and they were paid directly for that. Legally, there was no entitlement and indeed, if we were paying people simply on the basis of a hope that they would get some work at some stage without being in an analogous position elsewhere, that would potentially have legal repercussions across the public sector on a range of things.

There was a proposal to pay only examiners out of that group of around 4,000 or 5,000 people — that figure may be wrong — who fell into different categories. It would be legally indefensible to do that without paying everybody the full amount. Essentially, it is additional money that people would get for simply providing a service rather than for a job or full-time employment. I clearly followed the legal advice.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We need to move on. Robbie Butler might ask about that or comment on it. I know that he feels strongly about it. Very briefly, when will your independent review of grading from last year be started and finished?

Mr Weir: We envisage that it will start relatively soon. Because it has to be independent, tenders are being sought from outside organisations, and I understand that that is at a fairly advanced stage. Obviously, there are commercial sensitivities around that —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. What is the target date for completion?

Mr Weir: Just for the sake of completeness, we envisage that once the work is commenced, which should be relatively soon, it could, then, be done within about six weeks. Terms of reference have been signed off in connection with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Are you scoping a teacher-assessed model for 2021 should it be necessary?

Mr Weir: We have instructed CCEA to look at fallback options. However, it is undoubtedly the case, as it is across all the jurisdictions, that everybody accepts that the best possible solution is to have an exam-based situation. We have asked CCEA to scope out what a range of fallback options for its examinations could be. Exams are the best option.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Why, seven weeks into the new term, have you yet to publish guidance for this year's curriculum and this year's assessment?

Mr Weir: CCEA produced advice, and the Department sought the views of stakeholders. Even yesterday, a meeting took place. We will, hopefully, be in a position to publish the information that relates to how the curriculum interacts with examinations within the next few days. One of the other elements that we have to ensure is that our examinations have a level of comparability and portability. Discussions are ongoing with other jurisdictions around the exam timetable and the broad direction of travel. There is a meeting of the four nations' Education Ministers tomorrow morning. I hope that we will come to a final position that will enable us to move forward. I anticipate something fairly straightforward. It is important that we support our pupils in their progression on that basis and that we do not disadvantage anybody.

Mr Butler: I will start with the Minister, if that is OK. I want to stay on topic here because Daniel and the Chairperson brought up a couple of things that I would like to tease out a little bit further. I am glad to hear you say that you will be able to give further clarification to the sector within days around the curriculum and assessment. That is certainly the number-one topic that I am being lobbied on at the moment by students, stakeholders, teachers and representative bodies, so that will be very welcome.

You also intimated that the preferred assessment will be exams. On Daniel's point about the assessors and moderators, if that is the case and you are reliant on those people to be there next year to perform that function — bear in mind that the right decision was made about substitute teachers in relation to receiving a payment of some kind — what is the difference between substitute teachers who had no guaranteed work and examiners and moderators?

Mr Weir: Substitute teachers are probably a particular case. First of all, it was something that was directly funded, largely speaking, by the Executive centrally. You need to look behind the situation. We rely on many substitute teachers, and, for many, that is, effectively, a full-time job. There are people who will be dependent on that work to pay their mortgages. If you pull the rug out from under them, there is a major issue.

For examiners or others in that cohort, roughly speaking, the fees would be £500. It is also the fact that it is a direct contract for services, as opposed to employment, so it is a different kettle of fish. Legally, the advice that we got was that there was a difference between the two.

According to the Departmental Solicitor's Office, it is clear that there is no entitlement, and if you were to pay examiners, there would be a range of other groups that you would have to pay similarly, because that would not survive legal challenge. Again, it is about paying people for the services that they provide.

Mr Butler: There is a risk in that their services, as required next year, may not be available, and there may be a need for you to sub out for that.

Mr Weir: Examiners, generally speaking, are retired teachers. Clearly, nobody is going to survive on £500 per year for that period of time. Through no fault of their own, the preparation work that some people did was, ultimately, not needed, but they were paid fully for that. About £1 million was paid directly to examiners in the post-April period in connection with that.

No solution is watertight, but the legal advice that I received was that that was the best option.

Mr Butler: This is not a question, Minister, so genuinely does not require an answer. You used an analogy of £500 per year. There are examples of, particularly female, ex-teachers who perhaps do not have a good pension and supplement their income through that — significantly, actually into four- or five-figure sums — so those people will be disproportionately affected.

With regard to the ongoing situation with COVID, Minister, have you been in discussions about a circuit breaker around half-term and any extension to the Halloween break?

Mr Weir: I do not think there has been any discussion. I suppose I should disaggregate that. The whole Executive have to take a broader position as regards the levels of restrictions. It is probably well known that the Department of Health has drawn up a range of measures that, at some point, could be examined or be used.

If we were to introduce a circuit breaker, my preference would be that schools remain open during it. I will use the example of the Republic of Ireland, which probably has been clearer on its overall position compared with other jurisdictions. It has different levels of response, but in even the most extreme lockdown situation, level 5, childcare would continue and schools would remain open.

We have had the discussion about what mitigation measures and remote learning there can be. If children miss further elements of school, that will be damaging to their education. There is also a strong argument that the more children miss school, however much we try to put mitigation measures in place, the harder that will hit those who are more socially disadvantaged. There has been a strong commitment from the Executive to support education as much as possible.

Could there be circumstances in which some of those things evolve? We shall have to wait and see, but it is certainly not something that I want to see on the radar.

Mr Butler: I appreciate that, Minister, and I was not pushing for it. I was just looking for clarity for teachers, because some have asked.

Mr Weir: Northern Ireland being what it is, rumours will go about on a range of issues. We will see on social media things that have not been even discussed being presented as facts. We have made it clear, at every level of discussion on restrictions, that it is my position and the position of the Department that education needs to be protected as much as possible. To be fair, the position of the broader Executive and various members of all parties is that they see protecting education as much as possible as a key priority throughout all this.

Mr Butler: I have a final question for you, Minister. It is on flu jabs for teachers. Obviously, teachers have been under immense stress. We are seven weeks into the new term. They have worked extraordinarily hard, and we want to protect them as much as possible. We have talked about mental health and the need for helplines and so on. To protect teachers further, have there been discussions with the PHA about teachers availing themselves of flu jabs as we move into winter pressures and so on?

Mr Weir: The Department of Health and the PHA will deal with flu jabs through prioritisation. The tradition with flu jabs has always been to prioritise according to age and clinical need rather than profession. If there is any way that we can help to facilitate flu jabs, we will be supportive.

Mr Butler: I will shift briefly to the rest of the guys — Arlene, Tina and Mr Hanna. Thank you for all your help so far. Arlene, I have a short question for you. A lot of youth organisations have been operating diversionary strategies for a number of years. Have you any concerns about those and how difficult it is to operate them virtually? Is anything coming back from those bodies to indicate that there are any issues?

Ms Kee: During the summer, we were able to provide 91 interventions through Executive Office funding, and we diverted young people away from antisocial behaviour around bonfire times. That work was successfully and safely completed. In conjunction with the PSNI, we had 3,561 youth interventions with children and young people who were involved in antisocial behaviour around July and August. At this time, we have very good protocols in place. Our health and social care colleagues have come on board with that, and we are able to respond to the needs of young people on the streets and in our communities when they are vulnerable. That said, we are standing up generic youth services, so the on-street youth work and detached and outreach work that happen normally at this time are not operating, but we are working towards establishing that towards the end of October, subject to any further restrictions.

We had a review meeting yesterday with an Assistant Chief Constable to look at the interventions that took place over the summer and their impact. Everyone was pleased. Communication between organisations and at government level, and the working together, were strengthened; the interface with children and young people had increased; and there was a decrease in the number of young people who were arrested and in the outcomes that can sometimes affect children and young people negatively in the community. At this time, we are pleased with the situation that we are in. Queen's University, through Dr Colm Walsh, is writing up that practice to see what data we can look at. We will get ahead of this so that, before Christmas, we will have plans in place so that we are providing the interventions all year round and not leaving them until the last minute.

Mr Butler: The Chair has told me that my time is up, so I will be brief. Tina, given what we have learned, is advice and guidance ready for the childcare sector if we are to see more restrictions or a lockdown? That relates to contingency planning. Dale, can you provide an update on free school meals, uniform grants and any outstanding payments?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Catherine Kelly might ask about childcare, so I suggest that you double those up. Dale, do you want to come in on free school meals?

Mr Hanna: Yes. Robbie, we know that, across the system, we received between 1,000 and 1,500 applications for free school meals that do not have the appropriate supporting evidence. My team is actively contacting those parents to ensure that we get that supporting evidence. We have also written to schools to advise that, where there is an absolute humanitarian need, a school meal should be provided.

Mr Butler: Are uniform grants included in that, Dale?

Mr Hanna: Robbie, I do not have the exact figures, but my understanding is that our teams are up to date with the payment of uniform grants.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How many applications were without supporting evidence?

Mr Butler: Between 1,000 and 1,500.

Mr Hanna: Somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500, Chris — Chair, sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is OK. Robbie, thank you. I will bring in William Humphrey. I am fairly certain that Catherine Kelly will ask about childcare. Tina, you can give us an update on childcare at that point, hopefully.

Mr Humphrey: Good morning, everyone. Thanks very much. As a school governor, I join in thanking everyone who is involved in the education estate for their work in preparing schools for kids coming back. In particular, I thank the Minister for all his hard work. It is fair to say that, whatever criticism he receives — some unfairly, particularly at the Committee — he is very active and proactive on those issues, as are his officials. In particular, I thank Arlene Kee and her team and, in my area, Mark McBride and his colleagues.

I declare an interest as a member of the Scout Association. I want to draw attention to a letter that we all received last week from Claire King and the Uniform Youth Work Hub about outdoor events. I have to say that it is something that has really exercised me. I had contact from Boys' Brigade (BB) captains, scout leaders, guide leaders and scout and guide commissioners on those issues, because they were unable to do things last weekend that they were able to do at the same events the previous

weekend. I know that a meeting took place on Monday 28 September, which, I think, Arlene, you attended with your colleague. It has been indicated to me that guidance was being presented as rules that had to be adhered to. With regard to the restart policy for youth services, it almost appears to me — I have spoken to many youth leaders on the issue in the past week — that the guidance that was provided for schools has been lifted and put on youth and uniformed organisations, and it does not really fit or work. Arlene, can you come back to me on that?

Ms Kee: Sure. We engaged with young people, volunteers and youth staff to provide the guidance. With regard to the Minister's opening statement, the guidance that we have is mandatory for statutory staff and is guidance for the voluntary and community sector. It is up to them to take that guidance and consider, within their own governance and management arrangements, how they apply it, with a concern that we want to ensure that mitigating factors and the safety of children and young people are paramount.

The guidance that the Education Authority Youth Service has provided has been based on, yes, the New School Day and school guidance. However, it has been adapted to the youth setting and covers a number of factors, including how to support staff, which is separate and very different and distinct, understanding that children participate voluntarily in youth services — it is not mandatory — and how to prepare youth facilities. We provided a video of walking around the centre to show an example of how to physically place signage and protective factors. There is guidance on detached and outreach work, how to use public transport, dedicated youth work, youth transport and social distancing. We even gave curriculum materials, as a sample only, to staff so that they could see how to support one another and for us to see how we could support children and young people.

In summary, the guidance is based on that which has come from the PHA and the Chief Medical Officer. We are in a very agile situation in which, as the Minister said, we are responding to ongoing needs and particular situations. At this time, we are in a case in point, where there are increased cases of COVID-19 and greater concerns. We have asked the Chief Medical Officer for distinct advice on leaving a youth centre and going on what we call an educational visit or to an outdoor or residential centre. Those are paused at the moment. The situation is very agile. We were responding to the fact that there are increased concerns and risks that we want to mitigate.

Mr Humphrey: I will say this: all the people to whom I spoke are very responsible. They did the necessary preparatory work the week before. They had put in place the risk assessments and all that. They were incredulous that the situation had changed. The Northern Ireland Government have put in place new regulations for Londonderry and Strabane, but these seem to be being applied right across Northern Ireland. I will say this: these people are volunteers and are highly trained by their organisations. When you said that it was guidance, they saw it as rules that have to be adhered to. They also have to work alongside their Churches and the rules and guidance from their Church headquarters.

I thank you and the Minister for the calls that you took from me last Friday on this issue. However, I will say this respectfully: more work needs to be done with those organisations. I made this point to you on the phone on Friday. More work needs to be done with the Scouts, the Guides, the BB, the Girls' Brigade (GB) and so on to ensure that there is communication and that they have clarity and certainty. Let us be clear that indications went out earlier in the year that outdoor work was safer. A lot of the outdoor work that you are talking about involves educational visits, which, particularly for scouting and guiding, could continue over the autumn and winter, yet we will have scout groups and guide companies meeting in church halls. We need to be absolutely clear about that.

I also want to make a point about the centres that these organisations run: Crawfordsburn for the Scouts, Lorne for Girlguiding Ulster, Ganaway for the Boys' Brigade and Ballyhornan for Scouting Ireland. Those organisations need clarity because the centres, which are very well run and maintained, are large cost centres. They cannot operate to the optimum at the moment, and the organisations are under huge pressure. I read a statement from UK Outdoors earlier today that said that 15,000 jobs could be lost across the United Kingdom.

We need to be absolutely clear in getting that information out so that organisations can disseminate it to their thousands of leaders, who do hugely valuable work in our community. I do not think that we are at that point yet, but I hope that we will be in the near future. That is purely the point that I wanted to make this morning. As someone who is involved in scouting, I am aware of the work that uniformed organisations and youth organisations do and their commitment all year around. That is hugely important, not least the diversionary stuff that you were talking about, in an area like north Belfast. The organisations need all the support that they can get, and the issue needs more work.

Ms Kee: I will give a brief summary of the mitigation and communication that we have in place. Last week, I met representatives from the four main Churches. We are looking to see how we can work with the uniformed sector, which is currently at a disadvantage because a lot of churches are not giving them access to their premises. We are working on a plan at that level. Senior officials in the Youth Service are looking at uniformed organisations that do not have access to their normal third-party provision. We are looking to see where within the Education Authority estate we can provide that for them free of charge, starting in the next two weeks. Also, the Uniform Youth Work Hub and full-time officials from the uniformed sector have direct access to me as their contact for any issues, which includes access to the Chief Medical Officer. We meet once a week to scenario-plan and to look at all their issues.

That does not mean that we will not get it wrong. We are being very clear that we are in a very agile position. We are making ourselves available. We are working hard on advice and guidance. We are dealing with a very fluid situation. I am confident that we have the appropriate channels and problem-solving, solution-focused responses in place to deal with this issue, and we appreciate that the situation is fluid. I take on board what you are saying, William, and we are working very hard to understand this. The Minister has made progress, and we have great concerns about our outdoor centres and associated costs, and we are working with colleagues to address that as well.

Mr Humphrey: I will finish with this point. I got an email from our local guide commissioner, who pointed out that five ranger guides were meant to do a Duke of Edinburgh gold expedition last weekend. They had complied, and it had all been arranged in accordance with the COVID regulations. The expedition had to be cancelled because hiking is not allowed. Obviously, they were hugely disappointed. One girl, who is from Northern Ireland and studying at a university in England, came back for the weekend, but the expedition was cancelled at the last minute. She was out a considerable expense for a Duke of Edinburgh gold award expedition that could not take place.

Mr Weir: That is a very valid point. It is important because, when people are thinking about voluntary organisations, they do not realise that there are wider employment issues. Whatever response the Executive provide for a range of things, they have to bear in mind the impact that it has on people's lives and livelihoods. We are also slightly vulnerable if the ground shifts at different stages on what can happen in either indoor or outdoor settings. At the moment, we are probably on a direction of travel where some of those restrictions are being tightened up. That might mean that what is doable in one period may not be doable a week or two later. We will certainly work to maximise what can be done on the youth side, notwithstanding the fact that we may have a wider context beyond what happens in the Department.

Mr Humphrey: Thanks to Arlene. I have no criticism. I just want communication, clarity and certainty.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, William. Minister, just before I bring in Catherine Kelly, I want to make a quick point for clarification. Are pupils who are self-isolating counted as being present in school?

Mr Weir: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Definitely not.

Mr Weir: I do not believe so. The attendance figures that we have are for being directly in school. Sorry, Dale wants to come in.

Mr Hanna: Chair, to confirm: schools use a special code for children who are self-isolating.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): When you say that there is X per cent attendance in school, what does that mean?

Mr Weir: Those figures are for children physically in the building.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That does not include self-isolating pupils.

Mr Weir: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It does not include self-isolating pupils.

Mr Weir: No. When I quoted figures — one week was about 91.3% and another week was 94.5% — those are for children who are directly in school.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Catherine Kelly, do you have a question for the Minister?

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Arlene, Minister, Dale and Tina. My first question is about nurture, Minister. It is about the recent announcement of funding allocations for 15 schools, which is very welcome. We must never underestimate the importance of nurture for our children and young people, and the profound effect that it has on them in the future. The criteria that your Department used for the allocation of funding are very important. However, was a rural needs impact assessment carried out? I notice that not one rural school is included in the 15 named schools, and I wondered whether that had been taken into consideration. As I am sure that you are aware, many rural areas have high levels of deprivation and need. Many schools in those areas struggle to provide nurture without the much-needed additional funding. St Mary's Primary School in Pomeroy is one such school, and it has provided nurture for many years and participated in studies carried out by Queen's University and other universities because of its dedication to the nurture programme. I note that the list does not include any schools from my constituency of West Tyrone. Christ the King Primary School in Omagh is in an area of high deprivation. It also has a dedicated nurture unit, which is essential in supporting children in the area. It is in need of funding to continue that vital programme. Minister, will you commit to visiting a rural school such as St Mary's in Pomeroy so that the people there can show you the work that they have been doing through the years and the difference that that makes to the children who attend the school and in the community? Will you also visit Christ the King in Omagh, which ticks all the boxes for the criteria used? None of the school leaders to whom I have spoken has doubted your commitment to nurture, but they have said that the current budget needs to be increased for schools to be able to continue nurture provision in the time ahead. We are in unprecedented circumstances, there are a lot of pressures on our children and young people, and never before has nurture been so important. That is my first question. That was a bit of a ramble, Minister.

Mr Weir: No, Catherine. Dale will deal with the next question on childcare. On the matter of increasing the budget, like a lot of things, if I had more money, I would be very keen to spend it. There have been nurture units under different Ministers and in times when we did not have Ministers, and they have been a considerable success. Part of the additional funding this year is to try to mainstream that nurture provision as much as possible. Strict criteria were applied, and schools were ranked. Without going into it, I was aware that, as you mentioned, there were no schools in West Tyrone. In my constituency, I know of one school that fell a little below the required number and was ranked seventeenth or whatever. No schools in my constituency received funding. I am due to visit Omagh fairly soon. I do not know whether we will have time to incorporate those couple of visits, but, if we do not, I will be more than happy, if I get an invitation, to try to visit those couple of schools.

To be slightly pedantic about rurality, according to the strict definition — from a common-sense point of view, that will have to change soon — the vast majority of schools are rural schools. The current legal definition of a rural school is any school that is outside the old Belfast City Council boundaries and up in the north-west. Anywhere else in the country, including the middle of Craigavon or Lisburn, technically counts as a rural school. The schools that meet the criteria to get over the line are considered first and are then ranked according to the objective criteria of need. Another element of the announcement was that funding was guaranteed to schools that had already received funding. That funding has been guaranteed and locked in within the mainstream bit. I think that the money that we are providing for nurture is where the budget will be as we move ahead. If more money can be provided, it will be provided, but there is still a considerable gap between what we would like to spend on a range of issues and what we actually have. Even with money being tight, I was keen to ensure that there was a considerable level of expansion. If I had been able to announce 50 schools rather than 15, I would have been happy to do so.

Ms C Kelly: If the Department has to abide by the definition of rural as being outside Belfast or the north-west, there is a serious issue.

Mr Weir: That is historical. We are looking at a formula, and that work will conclude fairly soon. A slight complication is that the definition of rural has not always been uniform throughout government in Northern Ireland. It might differ between, say, the Department for Communities and DAERA. We are trying to redefine that, probably on the basis of settlement numbers from the Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA). What has to be decided is where the boundary point lies.

The flip side of that is, for instance, that a school that is genuinely in the countryside but five miles outside the city of Londonderry will, at the minute, technically speaking, count as an urban school. There is an anomaly on both sides. Fairly shortly, we will get that changed.

Ms C Kelly: I hope so. All children across the North need equality of opportunity.

Mr Weir: That is why the criteria, particularly on nurture, are based on objective need. In this context, a school has to be counted as urban or rural. However, to be fair, there are probably quite a lot of us living in various settlements who do not consider where they live to be either urban or rural. Leaving that aside for the moment, funding has to be based on objective need. Simply because somebody lives in one location rather than another should not matter. All have to be treated fairly and the same as one another.

Ms C Kelly: That is why the Rural Needs Act, if used — it has been applied in this case — is crucial in ensuring that children living in rural areas are not disadvantaged. Down through the years, various Departments have differentiated, and rural people have felt a sense of isolation. Today, more rural schools feel that same sense of isolation. If possible, I would like to get clarity on that in writing.

Mr Weir: We will get clarity. There is no discrimination. The only issue is this: for a nurture unit to work requires the school to be sustainable and have a certain number of pupils. That said, that can also be the case in urban areas where a school does not meet the criteria. That is the same for a certain level of capital build and a range of other things. It is not necessarily purely to do with rurality or even urbanisation.

Ms C Kelly: I have one further question, which relates to childcare.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Catherine, I suggest that we get Tina to answer this question. By all means, ask it.

Mr Weir: I am happy with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That will create time for a quick question from Justin and Maurice. Catherine, do you want to ask the question?

Ms C Kelly: Yes. I will be as brief as possible. Tina, on childcare, I am happy to hear that work is under way and that discussions are happening about financially supporting the childcare sector through the winter months. In the last number of days, we have heard about some settings being at their wits' end, more or less, and possibly having to close their doors. When Karen and I met you and the Minister recently, you took on board the need to include community settings, of which there are, I think, 74 across the North. I want to reiterate the need for those settings to be included in any plans going forward. With COVID cases on the rise across the North, it is not sustainable for a good few settings to stay open, because families are keeping their children at home. I just wanted to make that point.

On the childcare strategy, it is good to hear that discussions are ongoing and that the all-party group was instrumental in that. I look forward to the innovation labs. Hopefully, they will happen as early as possible in the new year.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, have you a question for the Minister? I realise that we need to try to get you away, Minister.

Mr McNulty: I have more than a quick question, Chair. I should be designated the same time as every other member. I am not a second-class member of the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am trying my best. Go ahead.

Mr McNulty: The Committee should be chaired in such a way that every member gets a chance to make known his views. Each member's view is of equal importance.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead.

Mr McNulty: Minister, the attendance of teachers, non-teaching staff and pupils since the restart, at 92% to 96%, is extraordinary, given that we are in the throes of a global pandemic. The attendance at special schools is between 85% and 90%, which is incredible. There has been an awful lot of doom and gloom. Given the circumstances, those figures are extraordinarily positive, and it signals the trust that parents have in our teachers. Monday past was World Teachers' Day. Will you join me now in heaping praise on our teachers, non-teaching staff and principals for creating an environment such that parents are confident about sending their kids to school in the midst of this global pandemic?

Mr Weir: Yes, Justin, I am very happy to do so. In the interest of being succinct, I will just say that a lot of hard work has been done and that the attendance shows the buy-in from parents who have confidence in our teaching and non-teaching staff and in the broader school system.

Mr McNulty: There are 3,786 childcare facilities in the North, and 3,066 have reopened post-COVID. Some 720 are still closed, which is 20%. Given that 72% of workers with children aged under 16 live in a household where all adults work, are you concerned that there is now an issue around access to childcare?

Mr Weir: The figures for day nurseries and day nurseries with school placement are around 94% and 97% respectively. What brings the figures down is counting childminders individually and separately, which creates a gap of about 20%.

For the sake of time, I will deal with any of the non-childcare stuff, and maybe Tina can deal with some of those queries at the end. I need to go fairly soon, Justin, but I am sure that Tina will pick up any of the childcare issues.

Mr McNulty: Robin Newton touched on CCEA. Teachers who contacted me are at their wits' end because of their work and the content that they are supposed to teach. I will relay to you a quick message from one teacher:

"Maybe there is no easy answer to this but, as one of many frustrated teachers in the North, we are almost into the second week of October, and we, as schools, have had no response yet to the CCEA consultation regarding GCSEs. This is a disgrace. It leaves the students not knowing exactly what they are doing and us teachers not knowing exactly what content we should be teaching. If you have any influence, could you ask the questions of those who can answer them?"

[Inaudible.]

Mr Weir: To some extent, we dealt with this earlier. We worked not just with CCEA but with stakeholders, particularly on GCSEs and A levels. We want to make sure that what is there is compatible so that our students are not disadvantaged. I hope to bring that process to an end and have information by the end of this week.

Mr McNulty: OK.

PHA guidance on the self-isolation of staff is creating a bit of an issue for school principals. There are staff who have tested negative but are still self-isolating. Consistency is key for teachers, especially for teachers of primary-school children. Are you concerned that so many teachers who tested negative are having to self-isolate and are unable to return to school? Are principals being supported in having substitute teachers provided at no extra cost to their school? How is that narrative unfolding on the ground?

Mr Weir: There is funding. I do not want to make it sound obvious that we have any level of [Inaudible.] We follow directly the PHA advice on when people have to self-isolate. Sometimes, that means that people who have tested negative still, under PHA advice, have to do so. It is the case that you could test negative on one day and, a few days down the line, develop symptoms and test positive. It is not absolutely clear-cut in that regard. The Executive have made funding available to schools for substitute teachers. That has largely been administered by the EA, which has said that funding will be demand-driven where possible.

Mr Hanna: We will pull together the costs of that currently and collate the information across the system. At this stage, we are asking schools to attach any COVID-related costs to a specific code,

including the cost of additional substitute cover. That is being collated on a system-wide basis. Then, we can work with DE colleagues on the funding for it.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Dale, and thank you, Minister. Has the Department sought input from the unions on the issue of the circuit breaker?

Mr Weir: In terms of specifically —?

Mr McNulty: The impact on schools.

Mr Weir: Overall, any discussion about a circuit breaker will be for the wider Executive. As with other jurisdictions, it is the case that education should be protected as much as possible. Any decision about a circuit breaker will not be for the Department of Education to make. We will have a view on that but it will be an Executive-wide decision. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have been in touch with the Prime Minister, the Taoiseach and the heads of the other devolved Administrations, and those decisions will be taken in a wider context. Were Northern Ireland to do a solo run in either direction, that would not be particularly helpful. It is a wider issue for the Executive.

Mr McNulty: The unions' guidance and input should be sought on how that might have an impact on their members.

A commitment was made that support for children with dyslexia would be the same post-COVID as it was pre-COVID. However, that is not the case. I have been contacted by parents who are concerned that their children are not getting the same support. Can you give me some assurance that that will be addressed?

Mr Weir: I do not have to hand the details of any impact on dyslexia. If you send us the details, we will be happy to chase that up for you and the Committee.

Mr McNulty: Hot school meals are provided only to kids who are in receipt of free school meals. In some schools, other children do not have access. What is your perspective on that issue?

Mr Weir: Dale will come in on that.

Mr Hanna: Justin, I am happy to say that 90% of all schools currently provide hot meals to all pupils. A small number of schools provide hot meals only to recipients of free school meals at the moment. Our catering teams are working with each of those schools individually to try to ensure that hot meals are provided elsewhere in the school. Some of those schools have particular circumstances. Again, if you have specific details, I will be happy to take that forward on your behalf.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Dale.

Minister, outdoor residential centres were already struggling and have experienced tough times in recent years. Will you commit to providing funding and support for them throughout this pandemic and beyond?

Mr Weir: We are trying to get things opened up as much as possible. We can look at that, but there is nothing additional in the budget for those things. We will try to work with those centres but we are dependent on public health advice as well.

Mr McNulty: Thank you very much for sticking with me, Minister. Derek Baker is stepping down. When does he move on?

Mr Weir: It will not be that far away. To be honest, it is not an ideal time to be discussing personnel issues.

Mr McNulty: The post will need to be filled properly. It is crucial in a pandemic that you have a permanent secretary by your side.

Mr Weir: I do not disagree with you, Justin. Human resources processes will need to be gone through. That is an internal Civil Service recruitment matter. We do not want to hold a post open for any longer

than it has to be. We will all miss Derek, but if I can have a permanent secretary who could take some of the flak from the Committee on occasions, I would welcome that.

Mr McNulty: We will all miss Derek being at your side. He has been steady in that regard, and we wish him well. Thank you all for your time.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, your colleague Maurice Bradley is the last member with a question. You will be glad to take a question from him.

Mr Weir: That is OK. I have time to do that. I know that there were a few supplementary questions on childcare.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We will follow those up with the officials.

Mr Weir: After I take questions from Maurice, I will have to go, but *[Inaudible]* the officials.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We understand. Thank you.

Mr M Bradley: I hope that you can hear me all right, Minister. I thank you and your officials for turning up today and making yourself available for questions, and thank you for your answers so far. I am last on the list, so most of the headline topics have been covered. *[Inaudible.]* Can you hear me all right?

Mr Weir: You are breaking up a wee bit, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: Oh dear. I apologise; I have a very poor connection. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, go ahead.

Mr M Bradley: I will start again. Thanks to the Minister and his team for their attendance and answers so far. I was contacted this morning by a parent whose child attends a school in the Coleraine area in which two teachers have tested positive for COVID-19. I understand that the PHA had input into the operational guidance for schools issued by the Department of Education. It makes reference to the joint assurance group in connection with the availability of mobile testing units (MTUs). I am thinking of the measures rolled out in the Derry city and Strabane council area recently. The Minister has already covered his Department's engagement with the PHA, but has there been any engagement between MTUs and schools to help to identify and stem the spread of the virus?

Mr Weir: I caught bits of that. We are working continually on that. So far, the number of mobile testing units from the Department of Health has been limited, but we are keen to carry on that level of work. Part of it, generally speaking, is about trying to ensure that people get tests fairly quickly. Some of the technology for very rapid tests has not been deployed as quickly as it should have been. The speed of turnaround in Northern Ireland is, ultimately, a question for the Department of Health, but we have tended to have a quicker turnaround in our testing facilities than other jurisdictions. One of the critical messages that we put out through the PHA is that, quite often — this is not confined to parents; it is in the wider context — people are contacting the PHA when a test is not really necessary. It is about ensuring that those who need a test get one.

Mr M Bradley: I have another wee question, and it relates to school transport. The economic downturn following the COVID-19 lockdown has been severe. I have been contacted by a number of parents who have no means of getting their child from a countryside setting to their nearest primary school. I understand that a payment is made annually, in January, to cover the year, but one particular parent is spending £55 a week on taxi fares to ensure that her four-year-old child attends school. She has been offered a payment of £185, which is inadequate. I understand that this is a common occurrence across Northern Ireland. It needs more than a standardised answer from the EA's transport section. What are your thoughts, Minister?

Mr Weir: I will hand over to Dale. The sound was a wee bit broken up there, Maurice.

Mr Hanna: In broad terms, we provide transport assistance to about 85,000 children. We provide financial assistance to a small number of those — about 3,000 across the Province — through our

parental payment scheme. It is assistance; it is not necessarily there to cover the entire cost of transport. Primarily, it is a parental responsibility.

The scheme was set up in such a way that pupils who live further away get a higher amount. Your quoted figure of £185 indicates to me that that child lives relatively close to the school. The scheme is not there to provide the full cost of transport. If you want to write to me with the details of the individual parent, we can look at that in a little more detail. Broadly speaking, however, if we have small numbers of pupils, we will not be able to put in place transport provision for them because it would not be efficient.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Maurice.

Minister, thank you very much. To be honest, there is a fairly concerning lack of information about some of the key school restart issues. Hopefully, we can return to them with you.

Will you make a ministerial statement about curriculum and assessment for 2020-21?

Mr Weir: No. If things can be sorted out, we intend to put the information out by the end of this week. We want to put the information out as rapidly as possible. There have been some concerns about delays in connection with that. As soon as things are finalised, we want to put that information out there. If I were to make a statement in the Assembly, we could not do anything until next week.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is not technically accurate, Minister. As far as I am aware, you could use the Ad Hoc Committee.

Mr Weir: My understanding is that the Ad Hoc Committee has, largely speaking, been stood down.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It has not. I understand the urgency. I also understand —

Mr Weir: We will get the stuff out in the next few days.

I had better go, folks. Thanks very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you.

OK. Tina, would you like to provide more of an update on the childcare issues to wrap up the meeting?

Ms Tina Dempster (Department of Education): Yes, thank you, Chair. I will address the three main issues that were covered.

Revised guidance for childminders and childcare settings was issued last Friday. The Chief Medical Officer also sent out a letter to parents. On Robbie's point, we work closely with the childcare reference group so that we can hear about operational issues as they happen — we meet weekly. We update any guidance or additional information that is required, and our Department of Health colleagues liaise with the PHA to get that out as quickly as possible.

On Catherine's points, as the Minister highlighted in his opening remarks, no funding has been made available, but we are working closely behind the scenes with the reference group and looking at two subsets of issues. The first is the funding and the requirements for temporary closures. We know that a few providers had to close after taking public health advice about COVID issues, and we are looking at what their needs are and what can be done. Secondly, we are looking at further sustainability and recovery funding. Childcare settings are working at a reduced capacity, but they still need to work in line with the infection-control measures and try to adhere to the integrity of the pod system. We are getting proposals from sector representatives who have done surveys with the providers. As part of the jigsaw, we are also looking at parental surveys, which will assist us in looking at what the needs are and what the support will be going forward.

We had an initial meeting with our colleagues to try to develop and move forward the innovation lab part of the childcare strategy. There is lots of preparation to be done in advance of that, but we hope to develop a timeline or road map of things that can happen by November. We are keen to start looking at the childcare strategy again, but it is dependent on how much we are still drawn into dealing with the COVID emergency and our response to it.

On Justin's point about closed childcare facilities, the number open is rising weekly. At the minute, we are at about 82%. As the Minister highlighted, the day nurseries are at about 93%, and day nurseries with school-age childcare are at about 97%. Some crèches have not opened fully yet, and about 4% of childminders have suspended their registration for other reasons such as maternity leave etc. The figures are rising. We monitor them weekly, and, in the last two or three weeks, the percentage open has risen from the high 70s to the current 82%.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks very much indeed, Tina. We welcome the work that is being done. Catherine mentioned the all-party group on childcare. You have been engaging provocatively with it, and we appreciate that.

Catherine or Robbie, do you want to ask any supplementary questions about childcare or youth services?

Mr Butler: Thanks, Tina. That clarifies earlier points, and I appreciate you coming back to some of those.

I have a question for Arlene. I have to declare an interest, as William did earlier, as a Boys' Brigade officer. We have been lobbied heavily on the guidance, regulations and so on. I am sorry that the Minister is not here. A helpline is available for teachers. Maybe you could ask the Minister whether you guys — the sector leads — could benefit from that. You have a small office that functions very highly, and you are flat out, so I am not trying to add to your workload, but would it be good for you to contact the Minister and ask him whether those guys could utilise the service that is open to teachers to get quick access to advice?

Ms Kee: We sought our sectoral colleagues' view on that, and, at this time, they do not think that they require that. They asked for a named officer whom they can phone for direction when necessary, and we have that in place: every organisation has a named person. In addition, we have weekly meetings ranging from one to two hours in the evening with various sectoral groups to problem-solve, build scenarios and for us to feed in questions. From this week, we are establishing services on a more regular basis, and the arrangement is that, if we need the helpline, there will be a dedicated youth services helpline available at evenings and weekends for colleagues, but the sector does not feel that it is required at this time.

Mr Butler: Excellent, Arlene. I am not surprised that you had an answer for me. Thank you. I appreciate that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Catherine, have you any supplementaries?

Ms C Kelly: Yes, thank you, Chair. Thanks for that, Tina. Community crèches are a lifeline, especially for women returning to work and education. They have not yet received any support. Following the meeting that Karen and I had with you, has there been any further development on that or on our request for a representative of that section of the sector to sit on the reference group?

Ms Dempster: Yes, Catherine, we envisage that, from September, the community crèches will be considered as part of any funding and any scheme that we look at. We are looking across all providers. We are aware of community crèches that are not in receipt of any other government funding, and we know the pressures that they will be under. We envisage that we will include them in our thinking and considerations going forward.

A Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) representative sits on the reference group, which Department of Health colleagues and I co-chair. Following our meeting with you and the Minister, I raised your issue with the group, and we will consider it.

Ms C Kelly: Thanks a million for that, Tina. It will be a big relief to the 74 settings that have fallen between the cracks until now.

Ms Dempster: I will just add that we need to look into that. Some will already receive other forms of government funding, and we need to be careful about double funding, as you would expect us to be. The 74 crèches will form part of our considerations, and we will look at those in depth. We just need to be careful about other government funding that might be going to some of them.

Ms C Kelly: No problem. Thank you, Tina.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much, officials. We are grateful for your time this morning and, indeed, for the Minister's attendance, and I send continued good wishes with the extremely important work that you are all taking forward on behalf of children and young people across Northern Ireland. Thank you.