



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on
the COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Education

21 December 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)

Dr Steve Aiken

Mr Jim Allister

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Ms Nicola Brogan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Pat Catney

Mr Alan Chambers

Mr Stewart Dickson

Mr Gordon Dunne

Ms Órlaithí Flynn

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Justin McNulty

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Robin Newton

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Christopher Stalford

Ms Claire Sugden

Mr Peter Weir

Miss Rachel Woods

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Agenda item 3 is a statement from the Minister of Education. I received notification on 20 December that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee today. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in members' packs. I welcome the Minister of Education to this meeting of the Committee, and invite him to make his statement. It should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, on the resumption of schools following the Christmas break and potential further actions to be taken within the education sector to limit the transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

Throughout this pandemic, despite the best efforts of us all, including parents, teachers and other staff within education, children have undoubtedly suffered. While generally less clinically vulnerable to COVID than adults, through the necessary restrictions that we have had to impose, they have had to endure disruption to their schooling, loss of learning, social isolation, detrimental impact on mental health and the prevention of the opportunity to lead a normal life. The consequences may be felt in their lives for years to come.

That is why I, my Department and the whole Executive have sought to prioritise the future of our young people and, in particular, their education, in consideration of any measures or restrictions. That is why the Executive agreed to a full return to school with mitigations, as soon as it was safe to do so, and why the Executive have approved a range of measures to support people, both academically and in mental health and well-being. That is why any decision on the education of our young people has not simply been taken in the context of the impact of COVID, but balanced against a wider range of considerations.

It is also why the Executive, in considering a range of very severe but necessary restrictions in the current circumstances, did not seek to close schools, but instead acknowledged that options need to be developed that protect the education and safety of our children while combating the virus. My Department, in cooperation with our colleagues in Health, was tasked with taking that forward. The work is building on existing strong working relationships that have been in place with the Health Minister and his officials throughout the pandemic, and the cooperation will continue and deepen beyond the immediacy of current events. The work is continuing, and, indeed, a further meeting was held this morning between officials. The provisions outlined today reflect that ongoing cooperation.

When examining any interventions that could be made in our schools, two things rapidly became very clear. First, there was a need to give swift clarity, particularly around the commencement of the new term in 2021, to our principals, teachers and educational staff, parents and, most of all, our pupils. Secondly, there was no potential intervention involving either temporary school closures or the removal of face-to-face learning for some or all of our students that was not damaging to them to a greater or lesser extent. That is why such an intervention should be taken only with extreme reluctance and as a last resort. I am also cognisant of the many young people who have prepared for exams in January, including over 25,000 taking GCSEs, and the need to enable them to sit those exams. That would, of course, be subject, as the Health Minister indicated earlier, to the need for any exam locations and logistics being compliant, without compromise, with public health guidance and regulations.

I must also have regard to the thousands of vulnerable children in Northern Ireland. I ask everyone to reflect on the effect that wholesale school closures could have on those children in special schools with particular learning needs and specialist needs. I must also consider the children already on the child protection register, those known to social services, whose COVID experience has been extremely traumatic. For those children, school is a safe environment and a place where they find reassurance.

Interventions that reduce face-to-face learning for students, to a greater or lesser degree, would inevitably result in even greater loss of learning than they have already suffered, damage their prospects in examinations, create further mental stress and anxiety and, for many vulnerable children, remove the opportunity to attend school, which is often the safest and most secure place in their lives. Furthermore, such damage would not be evenly spread but have the greatest impact on those most socially disadvantaged, widening further gaps in our system. That is why I have decided that schools need to reopen for face-to-face teaching for all students at their usual time in January. I will not take action that damages the future prospects of our young people, and nor will I put them at harm from a public health risk.

We need to be aware that following an approach of wholesale school closures will also have a direct effect on the number of doctors, nurses and other NHS staff available in January, many of whom would be home now looking after their children. The only other option would be to place their children into the care of grandparents, whom we surely all want to protect as more vulnerable adults.

However let me make this abundantly clear. The basis on which schools will return in January will not be on the basis of a return as normal. That would be an impossibility, and I agree with the Health Minister that matters cannot be as normal, and, given the unusual conditions that education has had to work in this year, it cannot even be a return to the new normal. I made that very clear to all my Executive colleagues, no later than last night. We need a further step change in the actions that are taken.

In coming to this conclusion, I am mindful of the need for a number of additional steps and actions to be taken in education to limit the spread of the virus and protect our students, parents and education staff alike. While a wide range of protective measures has been put in place, we must go further. That is not simply within the classroom, but it must also address, where possible, a range of external factors associated with educational settings and young people, which, in many instances, pose a greater threat. In developing a package of such interventions, which can be introduced swiftly, my Department will work not only with the Department of Health but with a wide range of other stakeholders such as principals, trade union representatives, the Education Authority (EA) and, in particular, the EA Youth Service, the Children's Commissioner, Translink and other Departments.

This must quickly lead to a package of measures that can be implemented in early January. While not exhaustive, consideration has already begun in the following areas: extension of the use of face coverings in post-primary schools; how compliance on face coverings and safety measures can be increased on school transport; how we can dramatically improve behaviour for the drop-off and collection of students around school gates; building on the current pilot scheme in Limavady, working alongside our colleagues in Health, to explore how we can begin to further roll out test and trace capacity in schools; and how messaging can be improved to our young people to increase responsible behaviour and safety in connection with the pandemic. The list is not exhaustive, and I will embrace any practical suggestion that further combats potential spread of the virus and protects our children's education. Other jurisdictions find themselves in a similar situation to us and have produced a range of variable actions. Common to all, however, is that they will all have some or all of their students resuming face-to-face education in the first week of January.

In taking strategic action to protect education and to limit transmission, we need to look beyond single interventions that will have run their course in one week or two and cease to have any impact from that point on; rather, we need a sustained package of interventions that day by day, week on week, month to month, have an ongoing positive contribution to our battle with COVID-19.

Finally, it is clear that, as regards the progress of the pandemic, we live in uncertain and fast-moving times. It is not simply about what needs to be done for restart; it is about the appropriate interventions that will be needed at various times to combat COVID-19 and to sustain education. Where we are today may not be where we will be in four weeks' time, and where we will be in four weeks' time may not be where we are in eight weeks' time. Schools must also be given the time to prepare for any change. Therefore, at this stage and depending on the public health situation, I propose that remote learning needs to be bought in temporarily for post-primary schools for non-exam year students with effect from 25 January until the end of half-term. We need to protect our most vulnerable students, and so, irrespective of year group, the aim will be to keep special schools open throughout this period and to make provision in all schools for vulnerable children. That is the best way to protect society and the future of our young people.

I commend the statement to the House.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I thank the Minister for his statement. I remind members that well over 20 members wish to speak. It is my intention to try to include everybody and allow members to ask supplementaries. However, that relies entirely on members being succinct in asking questions. Otherwise, not all members wishing to speak will be able to do so, and we may have to cut out supplementaries. We will monitor that as we go through.

Before I call the Chairperson of the Education Committee, I remind members that the Chairperson will get a little latitude.

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): It is unacceptable that the prospect of a cross-party Assembly recall was necessary for the Education Minister to make the statement today. I respectfully say that confidence in his approach is now critically low. We have teachers and pupils testing positive for COVID-19 this week and isolating through Christmas, an impending lockdown, the emergence of a new strain of COVID-19 and health advice to limit the opening of schools. Can I ask the Minister, how, in that context, he can justify anything other than a supported and phased reopening of schools with provision for special educational needs (SEN) and key workers' children? How is it safe or legal for private companies to administer mass testing of children on school premises for entrance to publicly funded secondary schools at this time?

Mr Weir: It is good to see the member taking his usual constructive and cooperative approach.

We have to balance out. It seems to me that the Chair of the Education Committee is not advocating face-to-face learning for children, and that is disappointing. We have to take into account all the factors. As I have indicated, I have spoken extensively to Health, and there is a package of measures.

As for return to school, every jurisdiction that can be named is having some or all its pupils back in the first week. For example, in England, which seems to be the epicentre of the new strain, about 75% are coming in immediately, with everybody back by the end of the first week. In the Republic of Ireland, everybody will be back from day one; indeed, they have announced no mitigations at this stage and are not looking at any level of disruption. This is a comprehensive package that is not simply about producing something for the first week or two; it looks to the longer term.

The member returns to the transfer test. The Health Minister was clear on this: for any environment in which any form of test takes place — the transfer test, GCSE or the mocks that many post-primary schools traditionally hold in January — the demand is the same. Those hosting the test have to be absolutely compliant with public health guidelines. There is no exception, and no differentiation is made between public or private. They will have to follow the public health guidance, do a risk assessment and make sure that everything in the location and the logistics are compatible with public health guidance. That is as it should be.

Mr Lyttle: My priority as Education Committee Chair has always been the safe education of children and young people. What possible rationale is there for introducing blended learning for years 8 to 10 at the end of January when lockdown is scheduled to complete?

Mr Weir: I spoke with health officials this morning. The development of the virus is uncertain, and I indicated that this is subject to the public health situation. We fear that, in a month's time, there may be more difficult circumstances, but that is not certain. We will see what impact the current restrictions have on that. If we are to protect children's education, we need to give schools some opportunity to prepare. I have not listed the years, but there will be non-exam year students involved, clearly. This is about trying to make sure that schools have the opportunity to prepare and to ensure that there is not a level of disruption to pupils. Back in March, we found that, because schools had to act instantaneously, it was not possible to get remote learning fully up and running straight away. We found that it was not delivered uniformly for a range of students. There is, therefore, a window of opportunity and a notice for schools to prepare. Often, because of the nature of the movement of the pandemic, one of the criticisms from education or health groups is, "We are being thrown this information and are expected to react by Monday", for instance. This forewarns people and gives them an opportunity to prepare. That is the sensible route forward.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is welcome. Minister, you were in the Chamber when questions were being posed to the Health Minister, so you will have heard the Health Minister make it clear in his statement that every Minister of the Executive had agreed that the continuation of education must be a priority. He also indicated that he could not see schools returning to normal in January and that he had written to you on that matter. What level of discussion have you had with the Health Minister on the return to school, and what was the detail of that discussion?

Mr Weir: A range of discussions have taken place, because, as I said, this is not a one-off event. It is not about a decision for a particular day in January; it goes beyond that. There have been discussions at a range of levels, as there have been throughout the pandemic. They have involved direct discussions with the Health Minister, whom I have spoken to on a number of occasions, detailed discussions with officials and direct dealings between myself and officials and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA). This morning, there were detailed conversations between officials, the CMO and the CSA on pathways and the ways forward. I spoke directly to the Chief Medical Officer this morning. It would be wrong to breach the ongoing confidentiality of any discussions, but, from those discussions, it is clear that, as things stand, Education and Health are on the same page on the way forward. It is an area in which people are happy at the direction of travel. I indicated that things may not be exactly the same in four or six weeks' time and that there may, therefore, be a need for further adjustments. There has been a good, cooperative relationship, one that will continue into the future as we move ahead. It is clear as we work alongside our Health officials that Education and Health are very much on the same page on the way forward.

Mr Newton: I and one other member of the Committee have been particularly concerned about the children whom you describe as "known to social services". You indicated that the COVID experience for those children has been extremely traumatic. As they return to school, what measures will you put in place for that group of children, Minister?

Mr Weir: It is important that we give particular levels of protection to those children and that when, for example, we look at the need generally for a return to school, which is particularly beneficial for those children, and look ahead to the likely situation in which there will be a requirement for certain year groups to engage in remote learning to ease some of the pressures, a special level of provision is made for those vulnerable children still to be at school. Some will be perfectly fine when they are at home, but, across the board, roughly 10% of our schoolchildren could be regarded as being vulnerable, and it is important that we provide a level of protection. That was a worry across all jurisdictions during earlier lockdowns, and it is important that we scope ahead and try to make sure that that protection is put in place for them.

Ms Mullan: Minister, I am deeply disappointed by your approach today. There is absolutely nothing new in today's statement, despite the advice of the Health Minister to you and the Executive last week that limiting school opening should be considered and the alarming developments in England over the weekend. On behalf of the entire sector, many members of which I have spoken to over the last number of days, I sincerely appeal to you to urgently review your position, in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, to ensure that the threat of infection in our schools is minimised.

Mr Weir: I am sorry that you are disappointed. There has been direct consultation. As I said, I spoke directly to the Chief Medical Officer only a few hours ago, and the way forward is one that Health sees as being compatible. I completely agree with the Health Minister that a return as normal is not sustainable, but this is not "as normal". This is about a range of measures and looking specifically at what can be done with schools having a level of preparation.

You mentioned reaction from the sector, and I have had a lot of contact on the issue. Some people have said that they do not want to see a return to school in January in the current situation, but I have had a lot of contact from people in the sector, including school principals and teachers, who have said, "It is important that we get children back in at the beginning of January". I have had an overwhelming number of contacts from parents saying that as well. There is no doubt that there is not a uniform view, but the measures that are being put in place today create both health protection and a protection for children's education.

Ms Mullan: Minister, you know that my position is that schools should be open in a sustained manner if it is safe to do so. I have continually raised with you the issue of contingency planning, and we have not yet seen any. I thank all our school leaders and school staff for their continued hard work. What level of engagement has the Minister had with teaching unions on the decision? Why was a meeting with the teaching unions last week cancelled?

Mr Weir: On the detail of options, there is constant contact with the teaching unions. I am not aware of the specifics of what was and was not said last week, but I can get the member the detail of that. There is not a uniform view among the profession, and what is expressed by the teachers' unions does not always reflect absolutely every teacher, believe me. I have had school principals and teachers getting in touch with me to say that they want to ensure that there is a resumption in January. Not that far from the member's constituency, across the border in Donegal, a full resumption will happen, as it will in the rest of the Republic of Ireland. I am sure that the member would not want to see a partitionist approach. Every jurisdiction, even Scotland and Wales, is aiming to have large sections of its school population back from the first week in January. For example, in Wales, a number of county councils are looking at full resumption from day one.

It is about trying to strike that balance. It is about ensuring that there is coordination with Health. That is happening on a daily basis, and there have been direct contacts, not simply at official level but with myself, on a whole range of issues. On that broader level, while there will always be different emphases between Health and Education, because we are pursuing slightly different absolute priorities, there is broad agreement on the prioritisation, not only not to close schools but to take mitigating measures.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, your statement today is totally lacking in definite action details. Given the situation, that is unforgivable. If you really believed that education was critically important, we would not be in this position to begin with. You would have had a plan rolled out and in place. Indeed, the statement that you made on Friday, calling on primary schools to host transfer tests, is further evidence that you are totally out of touch.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Chairperson. I appreciate that this is a Committee meeting, sir, but would you remind Mr McCrossan that comments are supposed to be directed through the Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Thank you for that. Go ahead, Mr McCrossan.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Indeed, the Minister's statement, issued on Friday, calling on primary schools to host transfer tests, is further evidence that the Minister is totally out of touch with our schools, principals and young people. Minister, you have failed our children and our schools. What explanation do you have for this failure, this abdication of responsibility and this unprecedented mismanagement of school principals, teachers, staff and pupils right across Northern Ireland, who have now given up hope of seeing any leadership from you as Minister of Education?

Mr Weir: Again, that is probably more of a comment than a question. I will deal with the specifics. I have stated — I am not alone in the House in saying this — that, particularly for the mental health and well-being of our children, the best place for the transfer tests to happen would be in primary schools. Others have said that as well. That would be my preferred solution. It is clear that that view is not shared throughout the sector, but some primary schools are supportive. However, it only becomes a realistic prospect if we get the buy-in of primary schools across the board. I regret that that buy-in is not there; it would be my preferred solution. My job is to try to deliver as much as possible for our young people and to point to where I believe the best solutions are, rather than to trade insults with the honourable member.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for not answering my concerns. Does the Minister accept that the appearance of the new variant of COVID will require a comprehensive review of his safety guidance to schools, and will the Minister undertake to commence a review immediately? Will he also seek to get school staff vaccinated as a priority?

Mr Weir: There will be change. Indeed, it is a changed situation. Some knowledge has been gained in the Department of Health, wherein, over the weekend, a change has occurred because of the variant. If you talk to health professionals about this, they say that the transmission rate of the new variant is greater. I spoke to the Chief Scientific Adviser about this yesterday. A lot of the precautions remain the same irrespective of the variant.

I suspect that the Health Minister was answering Education questions earlier, and there is a danger of me answering Health questions. The nature of the variant does not, for instance, mean that social distancing, face coverings or hygiene are any less effective. It means that the particles that are involved in the virus cling to a person's throat more; that is where the variation is.

A lot of the advice will largely remain the same, but, as part of that, a range of additional measures can be brought in fairly quickly. The principal concern of health professionals, the CMO and the CSA has not been what is happening within schools. It has been around some of the associated activities. For example, whereas we moved a while ago to a situation in which we had a common position on face coverings between public transport and school transport, we are now looking at — there has already been contact with the EA — how we can do spot checks on buses to make sure that that is ratcheted up.

The member makes a very good point about vaccinations. I am strongly in favour of vaccinations for teachers at an early stage. I will make representations to the Health Minister on that. To be fair to the Health Minister, as he stated, that is not a decision that lies entirely within his purview but within the wider UK group. However, I will urge the Health Minister to make the case to ramp up the speed with which teachers and education staff are able to receive the vaccine.

Mr Butler: Minister, with regard to blended learning and remote learning, what is your assessment of the availability and effectiveness of that to be rolled out for schools, and what is preventing you from engaging with school leaders at the moment to allow a phased return to allow them to better develop that system for the start of January?

Mr Weir: There has been debate over the exact timing of that. Teachers deserve a break over the Christmas period. It will take a little bit of time to put that in place. Some schools may be in a position to move quickly on that. In the earlier part of the year, we found that schools were moving at different speeds and that the effectiveness of remote learning was not the same across the country, so, given

that opportunity, there needs to be maximum roll-out so that it can be implemented consistently across the board.

I said in the statement that moving to any form of remote learning was being done as only a last resort and with reluctance. It is not a question of just the quality of the material or, indeed, the quality of the learning. With the best will in the world, remote learning, while it can be done very well, is not as good as face-to-face teaching. It is not about that interpersonal connection between teacher and pupil that is in face-to-face teaching. With preparation, it can be a good system, but is it second best? Yes, by definition it is, and that is part of the wider compromises that may need to be made across the piece.

Mr Butler: Minister, you will be well aware that I have been pushing the message for "bring it back to primary" on behalf of a mother from Bangor since perhaps March. It is something that I have been wedded to because we are not agreed in the House on transfer tests. I thought that that would be the best half-way house solution, but I was disappointed that it was on Friday night that it was accepted that it would be a good solution.

I was further disappointed this morning by an AQE statement that it is not prepared to accept the fact that bringing it back to primary would be physically safer to prevent the spread of COVID, and reduce the anxiety of pupils. Minister, what is to prevent you today and tomorrow from bringing the stakeholders together — be they AQE, GL, primary schools and the grammar-school sector — to put children first? All I hear is, "We put children first" and "We put children first". Our children need to be put first, and confidence needs to be put in place.

Mr Weir: From that point of view, I want to see them in primary schools. I acknowledge that the member has been proactive on that subject, and consistent in his views. The problem is that I can permit but I cannot compel, in terms of the fact that the exams are outside my remit, and are done by private organisations. For that to happen would also require the buy-in of primary schools' boards of governors. The problem is that there is a small appetite for that. It would certainly probably be acknowledged even by those who support bringing it back to primary that, in responses received to circulars, a relatively small number of schools said that they would be willing to do that.

The only way that we can do this equitably — it seems to me, unfortunately, extremely unlikely that this will be the case — would be if we had the buy-in of virtually all primary schools and governors. If we had some primary-school pupils doing the tests in their own schools and others not, it would be the equivalent of some playing at home and some playing away, and that would not be equitable.

I have always said that that is something that I want to see, and have permitted. The member cites the position since March. Indeed, going back to a previous time in government, it was in 2016 that the previous bar that said that they could not happen in primary schools was lifted by me, so I have always been of the view that that should be permitted, and that it would be advantageous. What I cannot do, unfortunately, is compel people.

Mr Stalford: I declare an interest as a governor of a primary school. During questions to the Health Minister on his statement, I quoted a statement made by Dr Shamez Ladhani, a consultant epidemiologist from Public Health England. On school closures, he said:

"It's not just about their education, it's about their growth, it's about their upbringing, it's about their social skills, it's about interacting with others, it's about their mental health, it's about making sure they get fed properly and they have access to social services ... yet we know that it's so important that we keep children in school".

Does the Minister agree that it should be a priority to keep children in school for precisely the reasons that Dr Ladhani has outlined?

Mr Weir: The Member is completely correct, and that is why the wider Executive have said that education should always be prioritised in any COVID actions that are taken. The issue is not simply COVID spread. We need to accept that, among some year groups, the bigger problem has not been what happens in schools but the socialisation that happens outside schools, and that has been seen in a large number of outbreaks.

On a wider health and mental health point, including progression for children in a range of ways, there is a significance to schools being open, and that is why medical and health professionals have

consistently said that it is not a narrow issue about the R rate in schools. It is about taking all those issues into account and producing a balanced approach.

Mr Stalford: A recent UNESCO report stated:

"School closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities. Their impact however is particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalized boys and girls and their families."

Does the Minister find it as absolutely bizarre as I do, that members of the Education Committee — the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly — are on their feet advocating for less time in school for our children?

Mr Lyttle: Let's close them in January, 25 January.

Mr Weir: Sorry, I can hear remarks from a sedentary position. Obviously, the member who made the remarks from a sedentary position has not listened to what I have said: schools will not be closing in January. Some groups will do remote learning if that is what is required by the public health position. It is also the case, as I stated, that remote learning is the last resort. It is a reluctant position.

Undoubtedly, I never cease to be amazed by the number of bizarre things that I come across in life, and I will not be particularly surprised today by anyone's remarks. It is also the case that remote learning will widen disadvantage. There is no doubt that keeping schools open is about trying to minimise the problems. With remote learning and school closures, the most able pupils will always flourish under whatever circumstances. The most financially advantaged families will always ensure that their children have the additional tuition and support that they need to be OK. The people who will be most disadvantaged by any disruption will be the vulnerable, the less able, those with special needs and those who are economically worst off, and that is why any steps that disrupt education have to be taken reluctantly.

Ms Brogan: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. First, I am pleased to hear that you see the importance of a consistent approach to the pandemic on the island of Ireland. We will be guided by evidence from either side of the border. Given the prospect of remote learning from 25 January, what are your plans to support children with special educational needs?

Mr Weir: Vulnerable children includes those with special educational needs who have a statement within mainstream schools and in special schools. Regardless of any action that is taken on remote learning, opportunities must remain for children to be in school, albeit that large cohorts will not be there. We have always got to make sure that the doors are open and that children have that opportunity. Even if they are doing remote learning, they can do it within the supported environment of school. That is why a critical distinction has been drawn, and that is, as I said in my statement, for whatever relevant year group.

Ms Brogan: Minister, during the first COVID wave, you reduced the statutory obligations for children with special educational needs to best endeavours. That, obviously, created major gaps in provision and support to those children and their families. What are you doing now to ensure that that will not be repeated?

Mr Weir: I have no intention to put forward any change to the situation. Obviously, we could all be overtaken by unforeseen events. I suppose that it is about trying to learn from the first wave. There was no alternative but to have some legal variation at that stage. Working alongside colleagues, we were not always able to get the fullest support that was needed. I take very seriously the need to protect special education, and that is why, in looking at whatever arrangements are put in place, trying to make sure that there is particular provision for those with special educational needs must be top of our agenda. Closing schools in general is not something that would be acceptable.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his efforts. I am not sure whether he or Minister Swann has the most difficult job at this time. However, to be fair to Minister Weir, he has been out and about, right across the Province, with his mask on, visiting schools throughout Northern Ireland. He is very aware of the issues and has been in contact with teachers, staff and pupils.

Minister, as has been said, we fully appreciate the fact that you mentioned special educational needs, and I know that you were kind enough to visit Clifton School in Bangor. How much did that visit, along with reviewing all the evidence, influence your thinking on the need to try to maximise the support that we can give to children with special needs? The fact that they can go to school to get support from the staff and their teachers is so important, not just to them but to their families.

Mr Weir: It is critical. Although there is often a lot of focus, rightly, on children and those within schools, we need to take a high level of cognisance of the impact on parents as well. To be able to provide the best support to children with special educational needs, there needs to be a mix of home and school. It is critical. Some of that is on the basis that what is medically available in schools is better. Also, we should take a look at the range of groups with special educational needs. For example, children with autism particularly value as much of a routine as possible. Again, we disrupt that at the peril of those children, which is why any actions that have to be taken must be taken in as measured a way as possible.

The member mentioned Clifton School, which shows that all politics is local. I have been to a number of special schools. It has very much impressed on me, particularly since the resumption of schooling in September, the need to protect those children.

On Minister Swann, I should say that neither of us is intending to bubble with the other over the Christmas period. That might be a little bit too depressing for both of us.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response and for his ongoing support for Clifton School.

Minister, you mentioned a number of additional measures to improve hygiene and health and safety in our schools. Will you give us an assurance that adequate funding will be provided to put in place the necessary measures in our schools, including deep cleaning when needed, and that budgets will not be limited, with staff and boards of governors needing to look at the sums to see whether they can afford to have effective, clean and hygienic schools?

Mr Weir: To be fair to the Executive, a number of bids have been met to provide additional support. Roughly speaking, this financial year, about £26 million has been spent on PPE, not the physical equipment of gloves and masks, but more frequently the use of cleaning materials. So there has been considerable support. That will not be found wanting.

However, a range of these measures are not necessarily massively cash dependent. For example, more proactivity in checking buses. We will work closely with Health on increasing testing. In post-primary schools, we may extend the locations in which masks and face coverings are worn. Those things are not particularly cash dependent, but they can be carried out. From the point of view of the general protections, particularly against the variant COVID-19, the scientific advice seems to be that the measures that we have for protection will tend to be the same, irrespective of whether it is for old COVID or new COVID.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was talking to a primary school principal this morning and a governor of another school, and from reading the Minister's statement, it is clear to me that, to be frank, this is about facilitating the 11-plus. I am disappointed in that.

Given the fact that the new strain of the virus has the potential to impact on every citizen, including schoolchildren, the Minister did not fully answer the question posed by my colleague Karen Mullan. What steps are you taking, in conjunction with the Minister of Health and other health advisers, to ensure that everybody in the school community is safe?

Mr Weir: The current virus impacts on everyone. We need to make sure that any myth about that is exploded. It is not simply a question of the new strain impacting on young people. Both the old strain and the new strain will have their impacts.

Society as a whole is taking a range of mitigations to try to protect people as much as possible. Can we have any situation in which everybody is 100% safe? No, we cannot. We can only try to mitigate the risks as best we can. That is why part of the rationale is to look at what can be done directly in January, and what can then be done to ease the pressures by way of remote learning. There are a range of measures that we can put in place and we have worked closely with officials from the

Department of Health. The Department of Education is not taking up a different position to that of Health.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I expect the Minister to follow the health and scientific advice, like any other Minister would, in relation to the whole school community. As a former Minister for Communities, I find it a bit rich for him to talk about deprivation and the impact of children's absence from school and, at the same time, to implement the 11-plus. I find that bizarre.

Will the Minister confirm what arrangements he has made and discussions he has had with the Department for Infrastructure with regard to school transport? We have all seen school buses at full capacity. We do not look for intimate secrets, but for an overall reflection of how the safety of children, and those travelling with them, will be monitored and changed where appropriate?

Mr Weir: I am glad that the member is not looking for intimate secrets from either me or Nicola Mallon.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Perish the thought.

Mr Weir: Indeed. The Executive adopted an approach to these wider bits on Thursday. We are working particularly with Health officials. As I said, this will also involve Translink, and it will be an evolving situation. My officials spoke to the EA this morning to see how it can roll out spot checks on school buses. The Department of Education, the Department for Infrastructure, Translink and the EA will have to take a joined-up approach. However, as the member will appreciate, we are still at the early stages of taking decisions. It is not a question of everything being there; it is not necessarily purely what would be there on day one. Equally important is what will be there on day 11, day 21 and day 31. It is about getting something sustainable. I will be very happy to work with my ministerial colleague Nichola Mallon and officials in Infrastructure to do what we can. If we are looking at measures on school buses, can we also look at the read-across in Translink to see whether some action can be taken? Most people are responsible, but it is about beefing up the level of compliance.

I recently visited a number of youth facilities, where the EA Youth Service and groups on the ground have direct contact with young people, particularly teenagers. There is a job of work to be done, and, with respect, it is not about you, me or the Minister of Health standing up and lecturing young people on what they should do; it is about getting peer information across. It is not simply about what we do on compliance but how we have effective messaging and who gets the message across to young people.

Mr McNulty: Many parents were concerned about their children potentially having to self-isolate over Christmas, and they took them out of school a week early. Who could blame them? Minister, whether you like it or not, that signals a failure of leadership from the Department of Education. The data shows that infection rates in the North are more than double than in other parts of the island, and the peak in numbers is among school-age children. What are the new mitigations? What are the new measures? What is the new contingency plan to allow children, teachers and school staff to return to school safely in January?

Mr Weir: I refer the member to the statement. It is a pity that he neither read it nor listened to it. A lot of parents were very keen to ensure that their children remained in school. When the issue was discussed at Executive level, it was very unclear on the medical side, in the run-up to Christmas, whether an earlier finish would have been beneficial in any way or counterproductive. That was the medical evidence that we got. There were concerns that putting large numbers of young people into the community in the teeth of Christmas could have led to a rise in the R rate. The source for the largest single incidents of the spread of the virus has tended to be socialisation away from school rather than within a school, which is a much more controlled environment. The member mentioned the Republic of Ireland, which has certain advantages in terms of location and community. The indications that I have heard in the last day or so are that the R rate is rising rapidly in the Republic of Ireland and is, I suspect, well above the rate in Northern Ireland. These things fluctuate. None of us should be in any way content that everything that is being done to limit the spread of the virus is more successful in one jurisdiction than in another.

Mr McNulty: Minister, I was in the Chamber for your statement and I read it. It still does not tell me what is happening in January. I am sure that teachers and principals will be asking the same questions: what will happen and where is the detail? Surely that should have been agreed and planned in advance of now, 10 months into the pandemic. What is the situation with vaccinations? What have you done with the Health Minister to ensure that there is a programme of vaccination for

teachers and school staff so that we can get children back to school safely, in as normal a way as possible and as quickly as possible?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the member has read the statement. It reminds me of the phrase of someone being none the wiser but at least remarkably better informed. The member mentioned vaccinations. The Health Minister answered questions on this, and I am trying to remember whether it was Mr McCrossan who raised the issue earlier. I am very much in favour of early vaccination for teachers. To be fair to the Health Minister, he said that this is not even within his remit in Northern Ireland. Decisions are being made on a four-nation basis. I urge him to lobby hard to ensure that teachers are prioritised to ensure that we maximise the level of support. He will not find me on the opposite side. We may be on opposite sides on a range of things, but this should not be one of them.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Before I call the next member, I remind the House that, so far, we have heard from 10 members and that a further 14 or 15 want to speak. We will not get through all of them. I ask members and the Minister to continue to be as brief as possible.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his comments so far. One of the joys of sitting here is that I have been contacted on social media by a principal in my constituency. The Minister said that you cannot compel either the providers of the transfer test or the grammar schools to do that [*Inaudible.*] One of the notes that the principal has just sent me is to the effect that the Education Authority can, on numerous health and safety grounds, compel. Speaking as a school governor, I know that that is the case. Since that is the case, why can you not meet the people who provide the transfer tests and the grammar schools and compel on health and safety grounds so that they can do the tests in primary schools?

Mr Weir: It is not simply a question of those providing the tests but of those who host the tests. It was clear that there is, unfortunately, strong opposition among a wide range of trade unions and primary schools to tests being held in primary schools.

You could have a situation in which you are forcing people into a building, where there may be strong opposition — the doors may even be shut and locked. It can be done only where there is buy-in. It must be a buy-in across primary schools, not simply a general acceptance. We must do this fairly.

I have a lot of sympathy for the position that the member outlines, as I suspect that he and I are on the same page. However, I reiterate: I can permit, I can encourage, but I cannot compel.

Dr Aiken: Bearing in mind the Minister's remarks, is there any way in which we could open a consultation and a dialogue with schools and governors, particularly given the short time that we have, as, frankly, it is the most sensible option?

Mr Weir: I understand that. However, as for dialogue and opening up a consultation, unfortunately, we have reached a point at which it seems unlikely that there will be any movement this year. When we look at what has happened during the pandemic, I believe that there is an opportunity to look at this again in the longer term, as it is not simply a one-off solution for this year, important though that is; it is about looking to the future.

Mrs Cameron: Minister, it is clear to the Assembly that the children who will suffer disproportionately from school closures are those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from challenging family circumstances. UNESCO said recently that school closures carried high social and economic costs across communities but that the impact was particularly severe for the vulnerable and marginalised. Earlier in the year, through the Speaker, I had meetings with principals across South Antrim. They expressed serious concerns about remote learning, as some pupils could not access it, not merely because of technology but because of a lack of family support. Has the Minister concerns about how remote learning would be made available to all who need it?

Mr Weir: The member makes a valid point. There may be gaps in facilities, despite considerable investment in devices. Sometimes, that will be about broadband availability in an area. Often, however, there may not be the necessary family support or the right environment. Indeed, many children who flourish at school may not flourish once detached from school. That is why, as time moves on, there will need to be a range of interventions, depending on where we are with the virus. Any actions that disrupt the direct learning of children should always be done most reluctantly and as a last resort.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the recent past, the Health Committee has taken evidence on the impact on children at home when schools are closed and in lockdowns. We know that home is not a safe place for many children and that school is. Does the Minister have any figures or statistics on how many reports on child safety originate from schools?

Mr Weir: I do not have those figures to hand, but I am sure that we can furnish the member with that information. It is, undoubtedly, the case that there are implications from not just an academic point of view but from the point of view of child safety. Part of the issue is that, while vulnerable children can be identified, where there are categories of children, the worry in various jurisdictions is that, at times, children in their home environment will not be on the radar. In some cases, we will not know what is happening behind closed doors. For instance, additional pressures might have built up in the family. There may be frustration, perhaps financial, and people find themselves having no alternative but to be at home 24/7. That creates a risk around domestic violence, abuse, potential threats and dangers to children. Yes, there are COVID implications to more children being at home that need to be weighed up, but the issue needs to be looked at in the wider context of risks to children.

Ms Flynn: I am conscious that, in his statement, the Minister has accepted that there is a need for some form of remote learning from 25 January. What assurance can he provide that that will not be too late? Was consideration given to staggering the reopening of schools in January?

Mr Weir: All options were looked at. The problem, even with remote learning at a later stage, is that any level of intervention that has large numbers of children at home will cause some level of damage to their education. It is about trying to strike that level of balance and indicating that it will impact on certain groups. At the moment, it seems that staggered re-entry is the only thing being offered in some jurisdictions, and, in some, nothing of that nature is being offered. To some extent, it could be seen as something to tick a box. We want to see where we can make smart interventions that will make an impact not only on day one but 10 or 20 days down the line. It is about trying to get that package of measures, which will be a more strategic approach to trying to combat the situation, while accepting that we are in a fast-moving situation and that dramatic changes may be required. None of us knows where we will be in a month or two months' time, and, sometimes, that can be virtuous, or it can be problematic.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his response. Principals have been expressing concerns in relation to exam centre arrangements and the need for pupils to be socially distanced. However, with schools due back on 4 January, there are concerns around the capacity of the invigilators who will be available. Is the Minister aware of that issue? If so, what is he doing to ensure that schools will have the staff required to invigilate exams?

Mr Weir: There is an opportunity, through the COVID funding, to bring in additional staff and substitute staff. In exam situations, those individuals will not be needed for long periods. Principally, GCSEs in subjects that are being examined in January will take place in the second week of January. That will tie up teachers as well, and it may well be the case that, in their arrangements, schools make some level of adjustment to their timetables. There is an opportunity for schools to draw down the funding that is there for substitutes.

As I said, the principal aim is to make sure that all public health guidance is followed. A number of schools are not doing any GCSEs in the January series, but somewhere in the region of 25,000 or 26,000 individuals have been entered for GCSEs in January. They have prepared for them, and they must be given the opportunity to take them. Off the top of my head, that comprises around 48,000 individual exams, so the scale is large. We should also remember that, on a daily basis, we deal with over 300,000 children being in school, so it is something that can be managed. Schools may be need to give a bit of thought to whether they need to make any adjustments to arrangements that week. For example, they might look at a slightly different way of staggering when their pupils come in that week. We are happy to work with schools on that issue.

Ms Bradshaw: As the health lead for the Alliance Party, I have been concerned for a long time that there is no real way to monitor compliance of people who are self-isolating. Parents who have contacted me are concerned about sending their children to test centres in case there are children there who have symptoms or are asymptomatic and give it to their children. Other parents are afraid to not send their children because they are not sure what will happen with getting into their chosen school if they do not turn up on the day. What is the position with transfer if pupils do not attend the test centres?

Mr Weir: In the previous answer, I set out the scale of the numbers. Probably the biggest issue is with the GCSEs. It is up to each test centre to be public health-compliant. If we are talking about the transfer test, both the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) have said in writing — again, this is not something that has been as well publicised as it should have been — that, as part of their arrangements, they will ensure that the pupils sitting are in the bubbles that relate to their class and that a range of measures will be in place, including distance and separation. Irrespective of whether it is private test like a transfer test, a school test or a public examination like a GCSE, the exact same list of measures will apply to make sure that the public health guidance is fulfilled. In the same way as with normal activity, there cannot be a guarantee that absolutely every individual will comply. There is no 100% guarantee, but every measure that can be taken is being taken.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, you did not address the point about the children who are self-isolating and do not attend. What are their arrangements for September?

Is there any way that the teachers could play a role and, as we saw in the summer with GCSEs and A levels, put forward a grade for the transfer test that would be acceptable to grammar schools?

Mr Weir: The problem is that the level of data available to a primary school to make a judgement call on where a child sits academically is a lot lower that it is to a post-primary school. The criteria that are applied for entry are ultimately a matter for the schools, but they would not use teachers' grades unless they were looking at particular cases in extreme circumstances. I do not know whether the necessary level of information would be available, and there would have to be something that is across the board. By that I mean that, if you are getting pupils from 15 or 20 primary schools applying to a post-primary school, you would have one teacher saying that child X was at a certain standard yet the teacher assessing child Y in a different school would be saying something completely different. Getting any level of moderation between those grades would be fairly impossible.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, you said, in response to my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín — I paraphrase — that you were not in a different place from Health. Can you confirm that the Health Minister, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser are satisfied that the measures that you have outlined today will allow Education to play its part in reducing the spread of COVID-19?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, I do not want to break the confidentiality of individual conversations. However, I gave an indication this morning that my officials were meeting the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. Arising out of those conversations, further refinements were made. I spoke directly to the Chief Medical Officer about an hour and a half before I appeared at the Assembly, and I believe that Health and Education are in a situation that both feel is a reasonable position to be in. If Education was doing it completely without reference to Health, we would be in possibly a slightly different position. If Health was doing things and did not have to concern itself with Education, would this be identical? Possibly not. From a practical point of view, we are in the same place. Without breaching the confidentiality of discussions that have taken place, not simply with officials but directly with the Chief Medical Officer, as well as discussions that took place this morning with the Chief Scientific Adviser and with the Minister, I believe that we have reached a position that is satisfactory to both Education and Health.

Mr O'Dowd: Given the seriousness of the deteriorating situation, I hope that this is more than a conversation. I would like to think that there is written confirmation and engagement between the Department of Education and the Department of Health in relation to this matter. This is not about conversations. This is about two Departments setting out a policy to protect public health.

Mr Weir: With respect, we are in a very fast-moving environment. Perhaps "conversation" gives an impression of some light chit-chat. That is not the case; these things have been gone into in depth. There have been clear-cut, in-depth discussions. Positions have been put down at times from that point of view. It is about trying to get to the position where Education and Health are on the same page, and I believe that to be the case.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, your statement refers to a number of measures as being under consideration. At what point will school principals be informed of those decisions, given that you are insisting on their early return in January?

Mr Weir: I am insisting that they return, frankly, at the same time when they would usually return. It is not an early return. It is the normal time, from a practical point of view, when they would return.

Around a range of those measures, there will be discussions to flesh out some of the details with a range of organisations. That may mean that not everything in every case is available on Monday 4 January, but I think that all those things are achievable within the first week. It is about trying to make sure, because there are different stakeholders who will be involved. Some of them do not directly relate to the schools themselves, because one of the issues that has been raised — raised fairly consistently — by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser is not what is happening within the boundaries of schools, because that is a very strong and controlled environment. That is not really where the major problem is in spreading the virus. It is actually about a range of issues that affect young people beyond the boundaries of the school, so some of these will be directly relevant to the school principals and others may be a little bit more tangential. The aim is to work with all stakeholders to be able to provide that certainty and information as soon as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: I note that many of the measures that you are considering have already been implemented in other jurisdictions with quite a bit of success, I understand. In relation to the role that school inspectors will have, particularly when remote learning is introduced on 25 January, how will you ensure that there is a consistent approach and it is not a postcode lottery?

Mr Weir: I think that there is a role for the inspectorate, and particularly also for the link officers, which were one of the most successful, as it turned out, innovations. Again, particularly if the focus is on post-primary schools, that enables a smaller cadre of schools, rather than if we involve primary schools in terms of numbers. There will be a role for the inspectorate and for link officers to try to make sure that there is as much consistency as possible. Can that be achieved 100%? I suspect not. There are some very good examples of remote learning out there. By its nature, it cannot be as good as face-to-face teaching, because children, in many cases, will not respond as well to remote learning as to being in the environment of teachers being directly in front of them.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that remote learning would need to be brought in for post primaries for non-exam-year students from 25 January. What is the rationale for 25 January?

Mr Weir: It is to give schools a little bit of time. It is also to ensure, as was mentioned by some members, that if this is to be done well and consistently, schools are given preparation time, particularly if people are preparing for remote learning.

A large number of post-primary pupils will be doing examinations during the second week of January, and that would, as indicated, probably draw in more staff to manage those. There has to be preparation time put in place for that to happen, and happen in a way that is not haphazard. That is why there has to be a little bit of lead-in time before that happens, while recognising that, ultimately, remote learning will not be as good as face-to-face teaching.

Miss Woods: On a different aspect, what impact will the six-week lockdown have on youth work and the Youth Service? Will they still be allowed to operate?

Mr Weir: We have been working with Health to develop specific advice. Given the time frame, the concentration has been directly on schools.

What is delivered to young people on the ground by Youth Service, and I am guilty of this myself, is often seen as being almost to the side of education, and not as important as school. A tremendous and very good job is being done by youth workers, and also by those within Youth Service and the EA. I want to utilise that service, particularly in the days to come, to get messaging on the ground of the detail of what will be there in terms of the interactions with young people. That is important.

I recently visited a Youth Service facility that catered for children with special educational needs. It was the largest such facility in the area, and if anybody needed convincing of the need for children to have the advantage of direct, face-to-face interaction in a youth or school setting, that would have convinced pretty much anybody.

Mr Allister: Might I recommend to the Minister in his situation an exhortation from Abraham Lincoln? He said:

"Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm."

Does the Minister agree that we cannot go any further in compromising the delivery of teaching, in compromising the content of teaching and in compromising the testing of teaching without fatally compromising the educational opportunities of the class of 2020 and 2021?

Mr Weir: I agree with the member that the absolute maximum needs to be done to protect young people and their teaching. That is why any actions that will be taken, even those that I announced today, will be done with the highest level of reluctance.

The only thing that I cannot be certain of is what the future holds, so I cannot give a blanket guarantee, but I will do all that I can to protect the quality of education that is there. Given that there is a divergent range of views, generally speaking, thrown my way from one extreme to the other in terms of my decisions, it is, taking the Abraham Lincoln analogy, maybe just as well that, under current restrictions, I am not in a position to visit the theatre.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Jim Allister for a supplementary, and let us not have a Gettysburg Address, thank you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I could not even aspire to that, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister agree that those who would suffer the most from the advice of some in the House to diminish education are those who, in fact, can afford to suffer any reduction the least?

Mr Weir: In the spirit of not giving the Gettysburg Address, which, to be fair, lasted for only three minutes and 20 seconds, was criticised at the time for being far too short, and was shorter than some of my answers in the House, and in the spirit of brevity, I will simply say yes to the member.

Mr Carroll: Despite the Health Minister pressing that schools should not continue as usual, you are effectively doing that and, potentially, placing the lives of many students, teachers, education workers and vulnerable people at risk. Will you perform another U-turn or will you continue down a reckless path that will put many people in danger and at risk?

Mr Weir: It is interesting that the great representative of socialism is actually advocating for a situation where those who will be the most disadvantaged by disruption to their education are those who are the most socially disadvantaged: that is a funny interpretation of socialism. I will always try to be as responsible as possible and protect our young people's opportunities. Whatever disruption happens to education, it will undoubtedly damage the future opportunities of our young people.

Mr Carroll: The Minister's broad swipes at socialism are quite pathetic but consistent. We should be talking about the serious issues that are at hand. The Minister's statement and answers have done nothing to alleviate the fears and anxieties of so many. Given that schools and testing centres are not immune from the spread of the virus, and that you have failed to implement a strategy to protect people in a bid to maintain the antiquated system of academic selection, I, and many others, believe that your position as a Minister is untenable. Has the Minister considered stepping aside?

Mr Weir: No. To be fair, the member has been very consistent in the constructive advice that he has given to me. However, I will not be taking his constructive advice to consider my position.

Ms Sugden: Minister, I spoke to teachers and parents at the weekend, and there seems to be a feeling of hopelessness about the current situation. One principal said that she felt despondent and undervalued. Now, I am sure that the Minister will disagree with those comments. However, that perception exists. What is the Minister doing to reassure parents and teachers?

I have a further concern about the level of trauma that children are experiencing and, to an extent, we are compounding that trauma with some of the messages that we are putting out such as, "You are doing this for your granny". Children are interpreting that as "I will kill my granny if I do that". Minister, that is not acceptable. We should not be putting that level of anxiety on to children and society in general. What are you doing to address that?

Mr Weir: I agree with the member. In my opening remarks, I said that some of the side effects of COVID, and the actions we have had to take, have been very damaging to children. For example, in Northern Ireland, we have sadly seen the death of someone under the age of 20 from the COVID

virus. Clinically, children are a lot less vulnerable to COVID, but the virus does impact on them in a range of other ways, including trauma. However, being in school and having the opportunity to learn regularly is good for children's mental health. So I am trying to make sure that the disruption that children face is kept to a minimum.

While the medical professions have been weighing up the impact of the spread, we have been weighing up the impact and long-term cost to the mental health of children. More so than in any other area, when decisions are being taken, we are taking into account and balancing out all the risks that are there for children. Inevitably, trauma will be created by COVID, and it is about trying to counteract that. That is why the Department has put additional funding into well-being for children. My fear is that some of the damage caused to society in the last year, particularly to children, will not be picked up immediately and will be there for years.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the Minister's comments. Minister, you have a very capable adviser who has done a significant piece of work on adverse childhood experiences, and I have no doubt that the coronavirus experience is going to be part of that work. Moving forward, we need to do more, because it is not enough to say that this is something that we will find in the future. We need to address that trauma now. I appreciate that you have put resources in place. However, when teachers and parents are telling me that not enough is being done, that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

Mr Weir: I will always work to the maximum of my ability within the maximum amount of available resources. There is funding this year that will be ongoing — additional money for mental health and well-being — and specific amounts are also being made available to schools and youth settings for direct mental health issues.

The member makes a valid point about the level of intervention that we make. Again, it is not directly across the board, because one thing that I have found is that, in a lot of cases, information comes back that, although a lot of children have been extremely resilient, there are others who are not in that position. Could more be done if there were greater levels of resources and greater opportunities? Yes, but I would always make sure that we do this to the maximum amount that is available.

Mr McGrath: If the Minister has a strange sensation in his fingers this week, it is his credibility with teachers, parents and principals slipping through them. Given that the Minister is insisting on proposing that some in schools have to wait until 25 January before moving to online learning, will he detail to us or publish the medical evidence that he has that those pupils will not catch or spread the virus during the first three weeks? If he will not do that, will he explain to the House and to the public why he is keeping the evidence secret?

Mr Weir: I am not keeping anything secret. The reality is that the virus is a risk wherever people are. If there were a place in society where people could go to be safe from the virus, that would be done. People are at risk. Yes, there is a risk at school. There is a risk in the community. There is a risk at home. Consequently, it is about balancing where there are risks with the level of education that our children can get. On the issues of mental health and social deprivation, it is about achieving a balance between all those things. That is recognised, I think, by the medical experts. It is not simply a matter of taking one course of action and diminishing everything from a medical point of view; it is about trying to reach a balance.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the admission by the Minister that there is a risk at school. Maybe he will accept that people are disappointed that nothing additional will be done on 4 January to protect schools from that risk and that that is what most people are angry about.

Given that, in January, private companies will use publicly funded education premises to deliver the transfer tests, is the Minister certain that they will adhere to the public health guidelines on numbers and that there will be no more than 15 people at those gatherings? What will he do to ensure that the guidelines are adhered to?

Mr Weir: I said that every test, whether a transfer test, a school test or a GCSE, carries a requirement that the guidance must be followed. That was stated not simply by me but, I think, by Minister Swann in answer to some of the wide-ranging questions that he addressed earlier. That is the same throughout. People should not use the crisis to bring out their long-standing opposition to academic selection. It is about ensuring that, in all cases, everybody is kept as safe as possible, while there is no guarantee of safety for everybody 100% of the time.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, to follow Mr McGrath's point, we know that GCSEs, which come under your remit, will go ahead. Transfer tests are not within your remit, so, for clarification for the House and for the public who are listening, what legal exemption has been given to the transfer test providers that are bringing people together for the tests at a time when others have been told not to call mass gatherings? In particular, I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that I have received a call from a church in our area that was not able to have a Christmas service — it is holding it on Boxing Day — because it would fall foul of the regulations on mass gatherings. To clarify, what legal exemptions have those private providers been given?

As the member will be aware regarding services on Boxing Day, restrictions are being put in place for the seven-day period directly after Christmas that are at a higher level than for other times. That is in the regulations. However, there is a broad exemption in the regulations for matters that are for an educational purpose. There will be no legal breach. Some people — the self-appointed lawyers — might take a different view, but there will be no legal breach in the tests taking place. Again, the issue is that any action that needs to be taken has to be completely compatible with public health guidance.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, youth clubs are not allowed to happen in primary schools and other schools across Northern Ireland because they operate outside education. The transfer tests, as you have said in many statements, are outside your control. It will be up to the external providers to run them. You have mentioned on several occasions that they will have to comply with the regulations and provide their own risk and health and safety assessments. Who overlooks those risk assessments and decides whether they comply with what Education requires in the use of its buildings and for the regulations?

Mr Weir: As part of the regulations, each school that is doing the test will need to do its own risk assessment and be compliant with it. People can agree or disagree with the transfer tests, but they clearly take place for an educational purpose.

Mr Catney: Minister, the revelation that there is a more infectious strain of the virus causes great alarm. Will you assure us that you are working closely with the Department of Health to ensure that vital questions are answered before schools return? Do social distancing measures need to be reviewed? Do we need to increase the space between pupils, reduce their proximity to other children and reduce the time spent with them? Is ventilation still effective as a mitigating measure? Is the new strain more airborne or more easily transmitted by touch?

Mr Weir: Epidemiologists would be in a better position to answer some of those questions directly. We are working closely with Health. Last night, I asked some questions of the Chief Scientific Adviser. It is not a question of it being more airborne. There is no evidence at this stage that, for example, the new strain lasts for any longer on a particular surface. Although we are in an evolving situation, the evidence so far suggests that someone catching this strain is ultimately at the same risk to their lives and health as with the current strain. There is no indication so far that the new strain is more severe in its impact and no suggestion that the vaccine is any less effective, although that is being checked. It was explained to me that, essentially, the difference is that, if you are breathing in the virus, you will breathe in a certain amount and breathe out a certain amount. What decides whether you will catch it or not will be the extent to which the virus remains in your system when you have ingested it. To use an analogy, the difference is largely that, because of the genetic difference in the virus, it catches more when it is ingested. That is the problem.

What that means is that, whether it is in schools or more generally in society, the general preventative measures such as social distancing, hygiene and face covering are, it appears at the moment, no more or less effective with the new strain than the old. We will always look to see whether there is updated guidance, but it suggests that the behavioural precautions that people should take to avoid the new strain are the same. The fact that the new strain is more transmissible means that people should be more on their guard, but the physical precautions should be the same as before.

Mr Catney: If it is unsafe for six people to be together, how on earth is it safe for 30 to be in a classroom with a teacher with no social distancing?

Mr Weir: The six people rule is about transfer in the community and the home. The concern is that a large percentage of the spread of the virus takes place at community level and particularly in the home. By its nature, that is a lot less regulated than other environments. Anything that we have done in the restart of schools has been in line with public health guidance, and what is deemed safe. I take on board what has been said by others, but no place is absolutely 100% safe. Unless someone locks

themselves in their house and has no contact whatever with anybody else ever again, nowhere can be safe. Interaction always carries some level of risk.

Mr Dickson: Minister, do you recognise that, in sending out letters late on a Friday to schools that, by and large, had closed for the Christmas break, you have caused a great deal of concern? It has compromised the confidence of teachers, the teaching community, principals, school governors, parents and indeed students. In doing that on Friday evening, your behaviour was reprehensible and regrettable.

Mr Weir: I will take the member's compliments. Given that the Executive decision was taken only on Thursday afternoon, there was a desire, as my statement indicated, to get clarity to schools as quickly as possible. That meant that, given that contact was made with Health on Friday as well, the earliest that any further decision could be taken was on the Friday. I can be accused of many things, but being a time lord able to go back in time is not one of them.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I hear what you say, but you are a stand-alone Minister and should make your own plans and take your own decisions. It did not require an Executive decision for you to write to schools in advance of the Christmas holidays.

Mr Weir: The member says that, but, in terms of additional measures and what was announced on the Friday about resumption, he has to be consistent. Either I am not working with Health and going on a solo run, or I am consulting Health to ensure compatibility: I cannot be doing both. The member says that, with regard to any wider Executive decision and any engagement with Health, I should simply have disregarded those and taken decisions a couple of weeks ago [*Interruption.*] The member shakes his head, but that is exactly what he is advocating. He said that I was in a position to make an announcement myself. I want to make sure that discussions take place between relevant Departments to ensure a consistent position and that any actions are taken across the board, not just by my Department but by others, on Executive decisions. I cannot go back in time and take pre-emptive decisions ahead of the Executive.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): That concludes questions on the statement.

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

That concludes this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. Merry Christmas to everyone. Safe home and safe holidays.