



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Restart:
Department of Education;
Education Authority

8 September 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Mr Jonathan Boyd	Department of Education
Mr James Hutchinson	Department of Education
Mr Paul Crooks	Education Authority
Ms Kim Scott	Education Authority

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Kim Scott and Paul Crooks from the Education Authority (EA). Clerk, we also have James Hutchinson, the director of Restart, and Jonathan Boyd, the head of the Restart team. I presume that they are both from the Department of Education.

The Committee Clerk: Yes. They are, indeed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

The Committee Clerk: Chair, yesterday, you asked for information on comparative isolation figures for this year and last year. They came through this morning, and I have sent those to everyone by email.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Are those from the Department of Education?

The Committee Clerk: They are, indeed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. It would be helpful if the departmental officials could speak to that data in detail during their briefing.

The Committee Clerk: Sure.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I advise the officials that the Committee will give them 10 minutes to make an opening statement. I give you a warm welcome to the Committee. Thank you.

Mr James Hutchinson (Department of Education): Good morning. I have a short opening statement, and you have received a paper from us. I am happy to take questions afterwards.

Essentially, where we are at the moment is that, following announcements by the Executive on the, if you like, relaxations for the new school term, we issued revised guidance to schools on 18 August. Obviously, that guidance seeks to build on the experience of school leaders and staff since the start of the pandemic, and the aim is to allow schools greater flexibility to determine how the guidance should be applied to their school. The relaxations were very much welcomed, but they do not mean that there are no mitigations in place in the school sector. Hand and respiratory hygiene, social distancing and face coverings are all still advised, as is the requirement to manage contacts. You will be aware that there is a regular asymptomatic testing programme for all post-primary school pupils and for staff in all schools. That remains in place. Young people attending post-primary schools and staff in all schools were asked and encouraged to carry out a lateral flow test (LFT) before they began school. We are also encouraging them to carry out those tests twice each week at home as the term progresses.

We hope that the mitigations and guidance have made the return to school more sustainable. There are positive indications. This time last year, we had no vaccination programme. We have made some changes to the way that things are happening in schools around close contacts. The Health Minister agreed at the Executive that there would be a change to the close contact guidance, and that has an impact on schools. We hope that that means that fewer children will be isolating over the course of this academic year and will spend more time in the classroom.

We recognise that the first few days of term have not been without their challenges. Many queries have been raised with us, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the EA, particularly on contact tracing and self-isolating, as the rules have changed since last term and are slightly more complex. We have worked closely with officials in Health, the PHA, schools and the EA to see how pressures on schools can be relieved while ensuring that we keep as many pupils in school as possible. We provided further clarity to schools last week, and you will be aware that, last night, the Minister announced that we continue to engage with Health officials and officials in the EA and PHA to see what further measures we can take to further alleviate those issues.

As I said, you have been given a paper from us that sets out the current position on the mitigations and the new guidance. I am happy to take any questions that you might have.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is that all that you want to say in your opening statement?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. I am happy with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I think that members will find that to be an extremely short opening statement given the scale of some of the challenges that we face, but we can move on to questions.

Largely, I think that you will find agreement among most people on what the key priorities for Education should be at this time. Those will include the safety of the school population — children, families and education staff, as well as clinically vulnerable pupils and their families and the staff who look after them. It also includes maximising in-school learning, as you mentioned, and contingency arrangements when safe dependence is not possible. What is your assessment of the preparedness of the Department of Education for the school return and to achieve those aims?

Mr Hutchinson: The guidance that we produced in the middle of August has been built up with the input of the stakeholders. We have been in constant touch with school leaders and the practitioners' group, and the guidance is based on the experience that schools have had over the previous year. Essentially, all those things that you said are key. The issues are safety in the school, the mitigations that are in place, the guidance that we have given to schools and the assistance provided by the EA, the PHA and others when schools need it.

Again, the whole purpose is that we want to achieve a balance where schools are safe and have the confidence that their pupils are safe in the environment and that the measures are in place. Looking at the Northern Ireland guidance compared with others, for example, there are more mitigations in our guidance than in some other jurisdictions. We have retained face coverings for a period of weeks, which will be reviewed. That reflects the fact that the health advice suggested that, because of the high levels of transmission in the community, that would be of assistance, so we have kept that in. We still have a reliance on hand and respiratory hygiene, cleaning and the issue of ventilation. All those

things are front and centre, and, to that end, we think that the guidance is a balanced document that gives schools the ability to manage their own conditions and effectively operate their schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, so you think that we are doing more and doing it better than other jurisdictions. I think that the measures that we need in order to achieve those aims of safety, in-school learning and contingency are well known and have been well platformed by this Committee for the duration of the pandemic. They include, though not exclusively, good ventilation and a robust test, trace and isolation system. Wales has introduced a £6 million air quality fund to make CO2 monitoring and air filtration readily available in its jurisdiction. Why has the Education Minister not introduced any such fund or assistance for schools in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hutchinson: I can update you on the latest position on that. Our colleagues in the Department are working very closely with colleagues in the devolved Administrations on the approach to ventilation and specifically on CO2 monitors and so on. Our EA colleagues may want to join in with more detail. The position at the moment is that, if a school reports an issue with a room where it thinks that ventilation is an issue, the Education Authority will come out with a CO2 monitor to assess the situation and any remedial works that may need to be done to that room to improve air flow or air quality. That may well include the use of filtration devices. That work is ongoing. I am not sure whether any of our EA colleagues want to give a clearer picture on that, given that they are working on it at the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I do not think that they have been able to join us yet. Is that right, Clerk?

Mr Hutchinson: That is unfortunate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Why would work be ongoing on something that is so essential to achieving the aim of getting more children in school when we are three weeks into the term?

Mr Hutchinson: That is not in isolation. The guidance from the Department already states the importance of good ventilation, opening windows and creating air flow. It also makes it clear that the issue of air flow management is an important one. At this stage, I would not say that we are behind. We are working with other Administrations, and we are working on what practical steps we need to take beyond that over the course of the term.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is stating the importance of it. Wales is delivering £6 million for an air quality fund. Why have we not taken similar action?

Mr Hutchinson: At the moment, we are taking a measured approach to seeing what the need is here and then working with schools. Over the coming period, we will assess the schools' requirement and, where there is a need, will make remedial changes. That may or may not include the use of more CO2 devices and other technologies.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We have known for quite some serious time that the other key measure necessary for safety and maximising in-school learning is a robust, fit-for-purpose testing, tracing and isolation system. I accept that we need to look at data closely, but it seems evident that the testing, tracing and isolation framework that was introduced for the new term by the Education Minister, in consultation with the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), is seriously lacking capacity, is placing unsustainable contact-tracing responsibility on school leaders and is based on a new approach to isolation, the rationale for which requires urgent explanation, if not review. Will you speak to that, please?

Mr Hutchinson: The current process for close contacts was agreed by the Executive in August, based on health advice. That also applies in the school setting. Effectively — again, this is health advice — a close contact in a school setting is advised to self-isolate until they take the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, and, if that is negative, they can return to school. There are other conditions around whether that person has taken a PCR test in the past 60 days, but that is the basic guidance. It reflects the guidance in the wider community. We are following health advice on it. The PHA advice to schools is to follow that guidance. We are aware that that has caused some issues in schools, particularly given the number of infections in the community that have been reported to schools. We have been working closely with officials in Health to bring forward proposals to change that. We

brought out some initial changes on Friday last week, which came into effect on Monday morning. We also recognise that there is an administrative burden on schools that are having to do the contact tracing. We are looking at ways to relieve some of that burden, and we hope to bring forward something in the coming days on that. At the moment, we are in discussions with the Department of Health, the PHA and colleagues in the EA on that subject.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Let me break that down. We have testing, tracing and isolation. Was the testing capacity necessary for that isolation approach to work in place for the start of the school term?

Mr Hutchinson: Testing capacity is not something that I can speak to. It is a matter for the Department of Health, but I am sure [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] be able to answer that question for you. We can certainly put that to them.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We will find some really difficult lines of questioning today, if we continue to pass all responsibility to the Department of Health. If the test, trace and isolation system in our schools requires a particular testing capacity to work, why do you not consider it as your responsibility?

Mr Hutchinson: Since the early part of last week, we have reacted to that. We found out quite quickly that the numbers of pupils being sent home for isolation was very high. That reflected the fact that the schools were sending out large groups at a time. Quite quickly, we examined the guidance that we had sent out to schools and asked them to send home a narrower group of close contacts. That would relieve pressure on the testing system. It was not anticipated that significant numbers of pupils would be isolating. In that context, we worked with our Health colleagues to mitigate pressures on the testing system. In practice, we have looked at the advice, and we are working along with our PHA and Health colleagues at the moment to see what further steps we can put in place urgently in the coming days to take action on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It seems pretty clear that the testing capacity was not in place. Principals are reporting that they have been completely overwhelmed by the tracing responsibility that has been placed on them. We are hearing reports of principals who, three weeks into term, have yet to be able to undertake any of their tasks other than tracing. Why was the Department of Education so ill-prepared to assist our school leaders with contact tracing?

Mr Hutchinson: The current contact-tracing guidance asks schools to get involved quite closely with the PHA to help with contact tracing. We recognise that a lot of cases are being reported to schools, because of the volume of cases in the community. We have advised schools that they can access funding to help with the administration costs of that, but we also recognise that that burden is significant, and we are taking steps to try to relieve it urgently. We are discussing with the PHA, the EA and others how to do that very urgently in the coming days.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. What is your assessment of the success or otherwise of the Department and the Minister's communication to schools of that isolation policy, given that a number of schools have deemed it inadequate? Is it, as you say, resulting in fewer children isolating?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not have data on the numbers of isolating children in the last couple of days. The PHA followed up the Department's guidance issued to schools on 18 August with detailed advice on managing close contacts. That advice issued to schools, along with a number of flow charts of what to do. In that context, yes, the advice was given to schools, and the PHA then provided support through its helpline.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): How successful do you believe that the communication of that advice and guidance has been, given that a number of schools are not following them?

Mr Hutchinson: The advice is there. I cannot comment on individual schools not following that advice for whatever reason. That advice is based on the prevailing health advice, as agreed by the Executive in August, as to what the approach to contact tracing and self-isolation would be in the community and in schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, and, three weeks into term, you cannot advise the Committee on whether the new approach is resulting in fewer children isolating?

Mr Hutchinson: At this stage, we have very high levels of infection in the community, so that is the overriding issue here. We are trying to manage that in schools and to work with our colleagues in the PHA and Health to mitigate the effects of that by making sure that only the absolute requirement for close contacts are asked to self-isolate. We are working hard at that and will bring something forward very shortly that, we hope, will provide a solution that improves the situation.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Very technical jargon. In terms of the safety of children, is the policy resulting in more COVID cases?

Mr Hutchinson: The issue here is that COVID in school is a reflection of the COVID levels in the wider community. Schools are not unsafe places. There are lots of mitigations in place. We have regular asymptomatic testing in post-primaries. There is the hygiene regime. We are advising parents not to send a symptomatic pupil to school. Schools are safe places. The fact that the underlying rate of infection in the community remains high is reflected in the number of pupils who are positive. That is a fact. Schools are not unsafe, and the measures taken by the Department are to make sure that schools stay a safe environment, despite the fact that there is an underlying level of infection in the community.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You do not know how this policy compares with previous policies in the number of children who are isolating or are COVID-positive.

Mr Hutchinson: The issue here is that there is an underlying high level of infection. We have, at the Executive level, relaxed the rules in society as part of the pathway out of the restrictions. Part of the consequence of that is that, at this stage, we have seen an increasing number of infections, and that is a community-level issue. Nothing that has happened to date in schools is any different from that. We are seeing a reflection of that societal infection rate. The measures that we have taken are proportionate and consistent with keeping schools safe.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, but, if one of the key aims of this policy is fewer children isolating, you do not know whether fewer children are isolating.

Mr Hutchinson: Until such time as the levels of infection in the community start to fall back, there will, unfortunately, be children who are ill and have to isolate or close contacts will be contacted and asked to isolate until such time as they can be tested. That is just a reflection of the high levels of infection in the community.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. When was the last time that the Education Minister gave a press conference or communicated to the public in a press conference manner on any of the new policies?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not have that information in front of me. I am sorry. I can get that to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I need to bring in other members at this point.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that, James. Did you watch the Education Committee meeting last Wednesday morning?

Mr Hutchinson: No, sorry, I did not, Mr Sheehan.

Mr Sheehan: Did you get briefed on it?

Mr Hutchinson: Pardon?

Mr Sheehan: Did you get briefed on what was said at the Committee?

Mr Hutchinson: Not in detail, no. I had some highlights.

Mr Sheehan: Could you tell us what you heard?

Mr Hutchinson: I know that there was criticism of the opening days of school, with the pressure on school leaders and the issue with contacting the PHA and the close contact advice.

Mr Sheehan: The criticism from representatives of trade unions and of school principals was very serious. Are you aware of that?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: OK. You say in the guidance that its aim is to:

"Support schools to provide the best possible education and service to children and young people while reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission"

and:

"provide clarity with regard to practical approaches for a safe operation of schools".

Would you agree with me that you have failed abysmally in that?

Mr Hutchinson: I would not agree with that at this stage. I would say that the guidance is there. What we have at the moment is a difficulty caused by the underlying level of infection in the community and the schools coping with that. The guidance provides schools with the information and resources that they need to manage the situation, so I would not agree with that statement.

Mr Sheehan: The experts had been warning us for weeks, if not months, that, when schools reopened after the summer holidays, there would inevitably be a surge in the number of cases of COVID-19. Did you hear those warnings?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. We were in touch with Health officials throughout the summer.

Mr Sheehan: You were. Were you in touch with PHA about testing capacity in the event of a surge of numbers in schools?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. We have been in touch with PHA as part of the process.

Mr Sheehan: What arrangements did you agree with PHA on testing capacity?

Mr Hutchinson: As I said, PHA manages testing capacity. The testing capacity is there. We recognise, and PHA recognises, that, from time to time, there will be surges. We have worked with PHA to put steps in place to manage the impact of the number of pupils isolating on that particular service. We accept the fact that, between us and PHA, we were aware of the possible increase in cases. Possibly, one thing that happened was that more pupils were referred for self-isolation and testing than we expected. That is a factor of the number of infections. At this stage, PHA testing capacity is in place, and, as far as we are aware — there may be some delays in getting a test — pupils are receiving tests.

Mr Sheehan: You were not expecting the numbers that have transpired. Is that what you are telling me, despite all the warnings that it was going to happen?

Mr Hutchinson: No. We are saying that the capacity of the system is there. At the moment, the particularly high level of infection in the community and the number of pupils being asked to self-isolate and test are putting pressure on it. We expected some pressure. We did not, maybe, expect those large numbers. That may settle down as schools, PHA and others start to manage the process of contact tracing in a slightly tighter way.

Mr Sheehan: Did you discuss any specific arrangements with PHA for testing in schools?

Mr Hutchinson: PHA has control of the testing system. You will be aware that PHA has a number of tools. Again, it is difficult to speak on its behalf, but —.

Mr Sheehan: I am not asking you to speak on its behalf; I am asking you to speak on your behalf. Did you have discussions with PHA about specific testing facilities for schools?

Mr Hutchinson: No. PHA's testing facilities are a general service, but it has the ability to —

Mr Sheehan: You did not.

Mr Hutchinson: — bring forward mobile testing — we did not; that is right — for testing capacity.

Mr Sheehan: You did not have discussions with PHA about specific testing facilities for schools. One reason for asking about this is that, on Monday morning, I spoke to a school principal with a number of pupils who had been in contact with a positive case. The school is in a deprived area of west Belfast. The closest place for those children to be tested was Castlewellan, and some of the families did not have access to a car.

I spoke to other teachers who needed to have children tested, and they were directed to Derry and to Enniskillen. Can you explain why you did not have discussions with the PHA about specific testing facilities for schools?

Mr Hutchinson: The PHA's testing facilities are as they are. We cannot influence —

Mr Sheehan: I am not asking you to speak for the PHA or what it has; I am asking you why the Department did not ask the PHA to put in place specific testing capacity when schools reopened, given that we were being warned over a number of weeks if not months that there would be an increase in transmission in schools when they reopened.

Mr Hutchinson: There are two points there. First, transmission in schools: there is increased transmission in the community, which shows up in cases being *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* Schools are not recognised as places where significant transmission takes place. Secondly, on the number of people requiring testing, the PHA's testing capacity is set on its expectation of the number of tests in the wider community, so I cannot answer the question of what else the PHA could have done for schools, because the issue is about the levels of infection in the wider community and not in schools per se.

Mr Sheehan: OK. I will move on.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Pat, before you move on. Very briefly, James, you keep passing this to the PHA, but the Education Minister put a school isolation policy in place that relied on day two and day eight PCR testing. Of course you should have been aware of whether the testing capacity was going to be in place for that to work.

Mr Hutchinson: The point is that the PCR testing capacity is there for the entirety of the isolation rules. Everyone has been advised to take a PCR test on days two and eight in Northern Ireland if they have had close contact — every adult — and that applies to schoolchildren as well. We accept that we did not specifically raise that issue with the PHA, but, again, that is a factor of the overall infection levels. We will continue to engage with the PHA on those very matters over the coming days.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Pat, sorry to cut across you there. Time is running short for you. Go ahead.

Mr Sheehan: No bother, Chris. Thanks.

I will move on to contingency planning for exams, James, in the event of serious disruption in schools. It appears at the minute that there has been serious disruption in at least some schools and that children's learning in school will be affected. Will you explain what contingency plans are in place? At the Education Committee meeting last week, school principals told us that they had not been informed about any contingency plans. Will you explain the contingency plans to the Committee, please?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. The Department and the Minister's intention this year is to keep schools in place and keep them open. It is very early in the term. We are seeing some issues, which we hope that we can resolve over the coming days and weeks, and we certainly hope that there will not be an impact on the examination process. We will keep that under review. At this stage, it is difficult to predict how things will go, but we are certainly hopeful that, with the close-contact advice changing, with the

vaccination programme rolling out and with, hopefully, general recovery over the coming months, we will be able to have a safe series of exams over the course of the school year.

Mr Sheehan: Well, that is a bit like Groundhog Day. We had the same issues last year. There was disruption in our schools; children were having to go home and self-isolate; and the Minister dithered and delayed making a decision on exams. I did not ask you what you are hoping for; I asked you to explain the contingency plans to the Committee. Please, tell us.

Mr Hutchinson: Essentially, everything that we would need to do has been done before. If, for example, there is a change in the situation that we cannot predict now, all the mitigations that we will need to put in place can be reintroduced if the Executive decide that that needs to happen. For a contingency, that is well understood; for example, schools are well aware of what would need to happen if there were a need to return to *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* Those contingencies are in place if they are needed. The rules were understood and were worked out in great detail over the past academic year, and they worked. Although it was not as good as in-classroom teaching, pupils' learning continued. In that context, those are all in place and could be reactivated if required, should the situation come to that point. That would very much be only on the advice of health professionals and a decision taken by the Executive, should that need to happen.

Mr Sheehan: OK, then explain to us what level of disruption there would have to be before any contingency plans are put in place.

Mr Hutchinson: We do not have information for that at the moment. It really would depend on what level of, I suppose, pandemic outbreak there was in society that would cause that. At the moment, the guidance suggests that there are pressures across the health system. We are aware of that, and it has always been the view that, as long as we can maintain safe operation of schools, keep them running safely, keep the kids safe in school and maintain teaching, we will keep schools open. Only if that could not take place will we move to any other form of system operation.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Pat, we will need to move this on shortly. Would you like to make a final comment?

Mr Sheehan: I will move in on one final thing. That response suggests to me that there is no contingency plan there. At the very least, I would like to see a skeleton of a contingency plan to deal with upcoming exams.

I want to go on to the mitigations that have been introduced in schools, James. You talked about a wide range of mitigations. Of course, most of those are general issues like the wearing of face coverings, hand hygiene and so forth. On ventilation, the only mitigation that has been offered to schools is that they should open windows. I note that you mentioned it this morning, and I saw an email yesterday about the EA potentially making assessments on carbon dioxide monitors. What happens in a school where the windows do not open? I was talking to one person yesterday who had spoken to a teacher who said that, because the school is so old, the windows are jammed shut with layer upon layer of paint. Some classrooms have no windows. What happens on a day of gale-force wind and driving rain when the windows cannot be opened? There does not seem to be a clear strategy on proper ventilation and air purification. The Chair already mentioned to you what is happening in Wales. What is the prospect of a similar initiative from the Department here to deal properly with ventilation?

Mr Hutchinson: There are a couple of points there. When a school has an issue with its ventilation system, it should in the first instance contact the EA, which can carry out remedial works. The EA, for example, could assist with painted-over windows. On unventilated rooms, you correctly say that the EA has a system whereby it will work with schools to improve that. Maybe EA colleagues want to talk a bit more about that process. We have been dealing with colleagues across the four nations on those very points in recent days.

Mr Paul Crooks (Education Authority): As you know, Pat, we have maintenance officers in schools, so we will work with schools on mitigating factors. We will work through all the processes of minor works that do not address windows and will then seek to look at putting in mechanical ventilation systems. We have set up a working group to look at that and effectively to make that operational immediately. The maintenance officers are in place, and the heads of maintenance and health and safety and I have set that up to work proactively with schools and to address those issues.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Pat, I will need to move us on. You can maybe come back in on some of those issues. Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: Chair, I am struck by the fact that we are discussing guidance that was agreed by the whole Executive, where all our parties are present. As far as I understand, there was no dissent from that guidance. I remind us all of that point at this stage of the proceedings.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The implementation of which is the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Mrs Dodds: That is exactly —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Diane.

Mrs Dodds: — what I am coming on to. It is important that we remember that all our parties signed up to the guidance.

There are a couple of things, James, about which I would like to get some information from the EA. By way of background, my colleagues and I had a meeting yesterday with Sara Long, the chief executive of the EA, on particular issues and the way in which it is treating some of the practical matters with which schools have to deal. I think that every one of us on the Committee agrees that the most important thing is to keep our children in school and give them a holistic experience of education and as broad an experience as they can possibly get. I have spoken to many young people over the past number of days; they are delighted to be back in school and doing games, practical subjects and so on. We do not want to deprive our young people of that holistic experience. James, I am struck by the fact that you said that there are discussions ongoing to simplify or modify the guidance etc, but you were quite tight-lipped about what that may be. Will you give us some information on how you hope to modify the guidance so that there is less of a burden on schools, parents and children, some of whom are traumatised by having to take those *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Hutchinson: I am sorry; I missed the end of that, but I think that I understand your question. Effectively, the issues that schools have had are with the contact-tracing and self-isolation guidance that has come out of the Executive's agreement in August, as you said, on how we deal with close contacts of positive cases. You will be aware of what we did in terms of the advice that Health gave to schools. If you are a doubly vaccinated adult, you do not need to self-isolate after a close contact, but you are advised to take a PCR test. The Health advice suggested that, in school situations, that should be modified so that pupils are encouraged to self-isolate until a PCR test is taken, and then, if it is negative, come back to school and take a second test a number of days later. That is, effectively, the PHA/Department of Health guidance that we are implementing in the school setting. The PHA and the Department of Health provided detailed guidance and advice to schools on how that is implemented.

The issues that have come up in recent days are around giving effect to that in practice. You will be aware that, with high numbers of infections in the community, schools are receiving a lot of reports from parents that their child has tested positive. In the current methodology, which we retained after the end of the previous term, the school plays a role in contact tracing. The school will normally be notified by a parent that their child has tested positive. The school will normally contact the Public Health Agency for advice, and it will work with the PHA to identify close contacts of that pupil. That has placed a workload on schools. If you think back to the previous term, you will remember that the overall prevalence, although it was rising towards the end of June, was relatively low, which reflected the fact that, at that stage, we were still coming out of a severe lockdown. There were still significant restrictions in the community, so virus rates of infection and transmission were relatively low, albeit they were rising. We are now in a situation where we have had a series of social relaxations, which, as you have seen over recent weeks, have resulted in an increase in community transmission, although that was expected and is something that we understand. The problem now is that that is manifesting itself in a pressure on school leaders, who are still trying to do their best to work with the PHA to identify close contacts and go through that process.

We totally accept that that has been a real pressure on staff. We took some steps last week to try to ameliorate that. They came into effect on Monday. To be fair, we have continued to talk to Health and the PHA because we recognise that, even with that change, there is still *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* The pressure is twofold: first, the number of reported cases in schools and, secondly,

the number of pupils being asked to self-isolate pending a PCR test, and the knock-on effect of that is pressure on the PCR testing system. Our ambition is to have a much tighter system of identification so that only those who absolutely need to self-isolate are asked to do so. We can certainly point to evidence from colleagues in Scotland, and I can send a link to the Committee. Data for all of last year in Scotland in the health sector, including periods when the alpha and delta variants were rife in the community, suggests that only 5% of close contacts of a pupil in school go on to become infected. We are trying to find the means to send fewer pupils home and to relieve the burden on schools. We discussed that at official level yesterday, and Ministers were involved. We will discuss it again today and will engage with school leaders and unions this afternoon on that very point. We will try to come up with practical solutions that we can implement quickly.

At this stage, we do not have the answers; we are working on the issue. We are trying to get something that we think will improve the situation, lessen the workload of school leaders, reduce the number of pupils being sent home to isolate and then reduce the burden on the PCR testing system. That is the objective towards which we are working, and, hopefully, over today and tomorrow, we can reach some agreement with Health as to how that is implemented.

Mrs Dodds: Right. Will we know, before the start of a new school week, for example, that there will be revised guidance that is helpful and is agreed by school leaders — they are the people who have to put this guidance into practice — that will keep our children and school staff safe and reduce the burden on and disruption to schools? Will that be available?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. We certainly hope that, before the end of this week, we will have something. We will work with the PHA to make sure that the advice to schools on contact tracing and identification of close contacts is amended and updated.

Mrs Dodds: Right. I am not asking you to give the contents of your discussions to the Committee, but we need reassurance that we will get to a stage where this very severe disruption to pupils' lives is reduced — lots of schools have been on to me about this — and that you will work with school leaders to make sure that they understand and agree with the process, because they have to implement it.

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. We are meeting a representative group of school leaders and trade unions this afternoon to discuss an outline of what that may look like. Health colleagues will be in attendance as well. We very much hope that, before the end of this week — hopefully, tomorrow — we will have something concrete to put out there.

Mrs Dodds: OK. May I ask a question of the EA? On this matter, the EA has to address significant issues. As I said, I had a long conversation yesterday with the chief executive of the EA, who told me that there is ongoing work on ventilation and whether it is necessary to introduce CO2 monitoring. If you are lucky enough to have a brand-spanking-new school, that is brilliant, and you are probably fine, but that is not always the case. You cannot have children sitting in a classroom with the wind blowing round them in the depths of winter. What is the EA doing specifically? Is work ongoing? Are you looking at and undertaking [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] and gathering information from schools on ventilation needs? Is a budget in place to deal with that?

Mr Crooks: We have a system in place whereby schools rely heavily on the support of their maintenance officers. Since the outset of the virus, if there are issues with ventilation, they are raised through their maintenance officers, and they undertake remedial work. We acknowledge that, moving forward, ventilation is key to everything. With the health and well-being of pupils in the classroom, ventilation may be an issue as we get into colder weather and into winter, so, yes, we are looking at other means. If it is not appropriate for windows to be open, we will look at forced ventilation. That is being actively looked at as we speak.

Mrs Dodds: Is that specific work relating to the pandemic, or is it general work? I would like us to address that issue reasonably quickly. I am not a ventilation expert. I know nothing about ventilation other than that people tell us that better-ventilated rooms are crucial to controlling the spread of the virus. Is that specific work and is it being given priority?

Mr Crooks: It is specific work. We realise that ventilation is key. Our priority is to look at pragmatic ways by which we can address that issue as a matter of urgency.

Mrs Dodds: You are doing some kind of audit of schools. Will you be able to present that information to the Minister and, ultimately, to the Committee?

Mr Crooks: Yes. As a starting point, working with colleagues in DE, we are looking at monitors. Following the example of what has happened in England, Scotland and Wales, we will look at monitors. Monitors will give a starting point and a benchmark if there were to be an issue with ventilation. That will allow us to address the issue accordingly. The problem thereafter is that we have an ageing estate and that, particularly in older schools, minor works may not address the issue. Therefore, we need to look at alternatives, which may include trickle ventilation systems or forced ventilation systems.

Mrs Dodds: How soon will we know the outcome of that work?

Mr Crooks: That is being dealt with as a priority. I meet colleagues from DE and my team daily, and that is our number one priority.

Mrs Dodds: We have to try to tackle this from all sides. It is a multifaceted problem and a crucial issue going forward. It is absolutely important.

I just have a question *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Diane, you will have to move on to your final comment.

Mrs Dodds: Well, I have a question for you, Chair. The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee took up the first 35 minutes of questioning, so I have had less than 10 minutes.

The other issue, Chair, is that it would be useful *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have it as 11 minutes 40 seconds. I am trying to be as flexible as I can with everybody, given the seriousness of the issue, so go ahead.

Mrs Dodds: All I am asking is whether we can make sure that we meet a representative from the Department of Health. I know that we are going to have a joint Committee meeting with Health and Education, but it would be useful to hear from the Department of Health and the PHA.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Obviously, we invited the PHA to attend our Committee meeting today, so *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mrs Dodds: Can we reissue that invitation? That would be useful.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Absolutely. I agree with you on that, Diane.

Before I move to Daniel, James referred to community transmission and to general changes to isolation policies having an impact on education. When you were in consultation with the CMO on isolation policies, did you ask what impact the changes to isolation policies would have on your ability to achieve the aim of having more children in school? Was the modelling done at that time?

Mr Hutchinson: I will try to address that from the discussions that we had with the CMO around isolation. The isolation policy, in its current form, means that a close contact will not be out for 10 days. That is the basic benefit. We are saying that they will be out until they have a PCR test, which will be much shorter than 10 days. There is a clear benefit to that. If we were to retain the 10-day policy with the current levels of infection, many more pupils would be out for longer. It is very clear that, with the change agreed by the Department of Health and the Executive, there will be an immediate benefit in terms of the number of isolated pupils. That is a simple case of mathematics.

The second question that flows from that is: if we are more targeted on those pupils whom we identify as close contacts, we will have the further benefit of a smaller contact group isolating for a shorter time. Over time, that will have an impact on the number of people isolating and on the duration of isolation.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You say that community transmission is one of the reasons for the number of cases in schools. Have you engaged with the CMO on whether any of the new policies are driving community transmission and on what impact that is having on school attendance?

Mr Hutchinson: There are a number of points there. None of the policies in place in schools is driving community transmission. Community transmission happens in the community. The evidence is that, in reality —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I did not say "school"; I asked about the new policies, generally.

Mr Hutchinson: I am not qualified to comment on that. Decisions on policy changes regarding the moving out of restrictions have been taken at Executive level, with the understanding that they are taken in the context of a more general reopening of society, with mitigations in place, which include the vaccination programme and so forth. That is the context in which those decisions were taken. They were not taken in a school context.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You keep saying that they are affecting schools, so separating them from the schools seems unwise. I will move to members.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you to the witnesses for being with us. At the outset, I want to challenge a number of things. First, for Diane Dodds, I want to make something clear for the record: parties did not agree to the DE guidance. The member would do well to seek advice from her party's Ministers on what was agreed at that Executive meeting. The DE guidance, in its current form, was certainly not agreed, and that is why the Assembly is being recalled tomorrow. The DUP will be reminded of that when the Assembly returns. Unfortunately, the DUP is not good at taking advice or listening, which is why we are in this situation.

I want to comment on a number of the points that were raised in response to Pat Sheehan's questions. James, I have concerns about some of your answers. I have considerable concerns about the very poor presentation that was given, considering the crisis that we are in and the challenges that schools and school leaders face. It is clear that there is a cultural issue in the Department of Education. I do not know whether it is ringing in the ears of the present Minister or the previous Minister or whether it is an issue at official level in the Department. However, one thing is sure: there has been poor planning for and strategising in dealing with this situation and with COVID from the outset.

You mentioned contingency, and you were asked about having a contingency plan in place. You said that you do not have one in place and that you do not need to have one in place until you need one. If that is the case, what is the Department of Education's definition of contingency? That confirmed to me that everything that the Department has been doing has been entirely reactionary and has depended on what has been happening on that particular day. That is exactly why we are in the situation that we are in, where, en masse, children are having to be isolated from schools. Teachers and school leaders are furious about that reality. This is not new. We are a year and a half into a pandemic, and it is clear that the Department of Education is not learning any lessons.

James, you keep mentioning the level of infection in the community. We know what the level of infection in the community is. We are aware that it is very high, and so, too, should the Department of Education be. It should have shown that awareness when preparing proper mitigations to protect children in schools. These are the figures, James. Have you seen the figures that the Department of Health released yesterday? Can you confirm that you have seen these figures?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes, I have seen that chart.

Mr McCrossan: If you look at the bottom of the chart, you will see that the four categories that I have highlighted in green are age groups that are in school. You will see that there is a considerable spike. Do you not see that? Why do you think that that is? That is precisely because the Department of Education has failed to protect children in schools and because the guidance that is in place is not fit for purpose. What will it take to make you realise that?

I will go to a question, Chair, but I had to say those things because it is deeply frustrating when we are presented with witnesses who are simply passing the buck and trying to make out that things are everyone else's fault. The reality is that the Department of Education is failing: it is failing children, teachers and principals miserably and continuing to do so. Some principals, for instance, have reported that the PCR testing on day two and, again, on day eight of children who have been in contact with a positive case is creating more problems than it is solving. That has been played out strongly on the radio and on the news over the past few days. That is clear. Children who get out of school to have the day two test and have a negative test are returning to school, but, by day eight,

have a positive test. The difficulty is that, on day eight, after the PCR test, they return to school and then have a positive result. The issue is the number of young people who are testing positive and, as a result, the number of schoolchildren who are out of school, more so now than under the previous guidance when a 10-day isolation period was in place. Is DE monitoring the situation in any way, and does it accept that, through this guidance, it is making things worse because it leads to more disruption of children's education than the previous guidance?

Mr Hutchinson: Your sound broke up slightly, but I think that I heard the last part of what you said. The guidance that you refer to is the guidance on close contacts. [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] Previously, the PHA advice that schools followed was that, if a pupil was a contact, they isolated for 10 days. There was no testing regime. So, effectively, when a pupil went out of school, they stayed out. Whether or not they had symptoms or were positive, they stayed out for 10 days.

In the absence of an Executive-led plan on the wider testing of close contacts, that advice was for everywhere. That is now in place. The reflection of that in schools, and for young people generally, is that you isolate until such times as you take a PCR test. That allows pupils to return to school if the test that they take — hopefully, as early as they can in the process — shows that they are clear of the virus. As soon as a child becomes a close contact, they or their parents should arrange for a test immediately. That could be within, hopefully, the first two days. That is where the day two comes from. If that test is negative, the pupil returns to school. That is the Health guidance that we are following.

The issue of the second test, or the day eight test, as it is called in the guidance, is where Health say, just to be doubly sure, given the incubation period of the virus, that it may take a number of days before the virus manifests itself. Therefore, there is a recommended day eight test. You are absolutely correct that there may be situations where a pupil, an individual in the workplace or a member of society is positive but in an asymptomatic fashion, or where the virus was not detected by the first test but the second test shows a positive result. That is true, and it is a part of the guidance from Health colleagues whom we work with.

It is easy to say that an infected child was in school for that time. What we say is that it might well be that that child was not infected because they were a close contact of an index case. They may well have been infected as part of the normal community transmission of the virus. Therefore, it is not necessarily true to say that there is a causal link from that pupil being a close contact, testing negative and returning to school. That is the Health advice.

Mr McCrossan: James, I am sorry, but I will interrupt you. I have had enough of this passing-the-buck exercise. Look at those figures and the age groups. Do you see them? Stop saying that it results from community transmission and that the Department of Education has guidance in place to protect children. Stop saying that. Look at the figures, James.

Mr Hutchinson: If you want to examine the figures — I am not a health professional — you will see that they reflect the fact that lower age groups are those who are unvaccinated in society. Hence the number of cases in society. That is my understanding of it.

Mr McCrossan: The virus is spreading in schools because of a failure of the DE guidance that has been put in place. Every principal and teacher is telling the Department that the guidance is failing. It is not working. It is not fit for purpose.

Mr Hutchinson: I do not agree with that at all. The guidance to schools allows schools to remain a safe environment. Advice from both Education and Health is there. Schools are safe places. The evidence has been debated. A number of studies that we can share with you show that transmission in schools is not a significant event. In studies that the Scottish Government commissioned recently, it is shown, using data from last year, that 95% of close contacts are sent home unnecessarily. That is an indication that schools remain safe places for children. The issues are how to keep them safe through good hygiene, good preventative measures, good cooperation with parents and regular asymptomatic testing to keep schools open and to keep children learning in the classroom.

Mr McCrossan: James, I agree —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will interrupt, Daniel, very briefly. The figures that Daniel is showing are for the last seven days and have 12% of cases in the 10-14 age bracket. That is ultimately disrupting those children and preventing them from attending school. COVID-positive children have to self-isolate for 10 days, away from their school. If you are saying that the reason why the children are

missing school is community transmission, what case are you making to the PHA or the Department of Health about what needs to be done to address that? If your aim is to have children in school, a 12% infection rate for those aged 10 to 14 will obviously impact on that.

Mr Hutchinson: There are two points to make. That is absolutely correct: there are large numbers of infections in that age group because it is, as yet, unvaccinated. The other numbers reflect the fact that vaccinations are impacting on the number of cases. That is the first point. The second point is that, yes, the ambition is to keep kids in school. However, you have to reflect that, where there are a number of infections in an age group, those affected will have to comply with health advice to isolate for a period until they can be tested. This is about our taking steps to make sure that we can get as many people in school for as much time as possible. That reflects the fact that the guidance is there to try to keep the school environment safe. It will not necessarily be as simple as saying, "The guidance will prevent community transmission", because it cannot. What we are saying is, "Within a school environment, we are taking as many steps as possible to keep people safe".

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Of course, the guidance, on its own, cannot prevent community transmission, but what are you doing, what is the Education Minister doing and what is the Health Minister doing to communicate with the public on community transmission levels that are keeping children from school for periods of 10 days if they are COVID positive? We have not heard from them in weeks.

Mr McCrossan: Exactly. What we also want to know — I asked this question, and it was not answered — is whether DE is monitoring whether the day two and day eight testing regime is making things worse and resulting in more children being isolated in the long term than the 10-day isolation regime that was in place under the previous guidance. That is what we want to know. I know, James, that you are not able to answer that question, because the Department is not properly monitoring. You are listening only to what is being reported back to you by schools, which clearly indicates that the situation is worse. That is where my concern lies, and you made a statement —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, that is a fair question. Do you want to let James respond to it?

Mr Hutchinson: There are two conflating points. More children are self-isolating because there is a higher level of infection. That is just a statement on the numbers of infected people, and the chart is a simple and good illustration of that. So, yes, there will be more isolations, even with the day two and day eight policy. With the previous regime, every time a positive case was identified, that person and their close contacts were out of school for 10 days. Now, they are out for two and then come back to school. The basic system is that, potentially, there will be disruptions that are slightly sporadic in nature, but, hopefully, if the infection rate settles down and we can really narrow down and take in the close contact arrangements, we will see many, many fewer pupils being asked to self-isolate, and they will be doing so for shorter periods. That is the intent of the policy that we and the Health Department have been discussing.

Mr McCrossan: The answer to the question is that you are not monitoring it, James. Is that correct?

Mr Hutchinson: I am confused by the term "monitoring". We are implementing what is, effectively, the Health guidance on self-isolation. We will keep that under review, and we will monitor and discuss it with PHA and Health colleagues, so, yes —

Mr McCrossan: I asked you a direct question. Is it the belief of the Department, if there is any monitoring going on, that, compared with the previous regime, which required children to self-isolate for 10 days, the day two and day eight regime will worsen the situation by increasing the number of children having to isolate? It is a simple question.

Mr Hutchinson: We do not believe that that will be the case, no.

Mr McCrossan: It is the case — it is the case. You are not monitoring it, and that is the problem. I am going to say this —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, make this your final comment or question, please.

Mr McCrossan: I did not want to say this, but I will make this statement. Schools are safe places, and they are safe because of the hard work of our teachers and principals and because of the mitigations

that they have put in place. However, schools are continually being made unsafe by the failures of the Department, the continual feet trailing that goes on and its poor reactions to the challenges that our schools have faced due to COVID-19.

I want to put my final question to Paul Crooks. It is about his reply to Diane Dodds on having CO2 monitors, air purifying systems and ventilation systems in schools. Ministers in other jurisdictions have moved swiftly to resolve that issue. We are a year and a half into the crisis, and little has been done. I find it difficult to believe, Paul, that you are telling us at the Committee today that that is a priority for the Education Authority and the Department. I would hate to see what is not a priority, if that is one, because nothing on ventilation has been done in schools to prepare for pupils' return. Some classrooms have windows that do not open at all, and the classrooms are filled with unvaccinated children who are most at risk of catching the virus. It is my firm opinion that the Department has done very little to date to provide good ventilation. That said, considering that we have all known for well over a year that good ventilation is significant in mitigating the risk of infection and in combating COVID-19, why, James, have the Department of Education and the Education Authority not been more proactive and required the owners of the school estate to conduct such an assessment and to report back to the Department of Education? What communication is happening between the DE and EA on ventilation systems in schools? As far as I can see, very little has happened to date. COVID may have long gone down the road before you actually get the work started. James, you can take that question first, and Paul can come in after you, because the Department of Education provides the funding.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, I think that the key question that you are asking is this: in what way are the DE and EA communicating with schools on improvements that need to be made with ventilation? Is that correct?

Mr McCrossan: What have they put in place to ensure that it is actually delivered? Paul mentioned that it is a priority, so, if it is a priority, there will be clear answers to that question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I will bring in Robbie Butler immediately after that.

Mr Hutchinson: The issue there is that we have been in touch with colleagues across the four nations and Administrations to work out the best way to deal with this issue. We have been in touch with schools. EA maintenance officers are there on the ground and working with schools where there are issues. Paul has explained that we are looking at the issue of CO2 monitors and at remedial works where necessary. That will include examining things like air filtration systems where there are unventilated spaces and at investments in ventilation. That is active. Paul has already described the priority that it has in the EA and in the Department.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We will move on to Robbie Butler. *[Pause.]* I think that you might be on mute.

Mr Butler: That is the first time this year, but I am sure that it will not be the last.

The line of questioning has been robust, and, to be fair, it is right that it is robust, but I just want to pull it back here, if we can, because a lot of people watch the Education Committee and will be watching it this morning. I want us to get this right. Every member was right to raise the questions that they raised, perhaps even in the manner in which they did, but I want to get a statement from you, James, if that is OK. It is in all the written documentation and in the guidance that I have read that schools are safe. Daniel has just shown a graph that shows a level of transmission in the 10-to-14 age group that looks startlingly high. If we were to look at that in isolation, it could very much validate what he has been saying, but that evidence has to be looked at along with the evidence of the previous week and the week before.

I want to extend Daniel's line of questioning a wee bit further. Is it appropriate to assume that the opening of schools and the lack of mitigations in place have played into the high percentage? You said that those students are unvaccinated, and I get that, but we are not working with a lack of hindsight here. We now know where we were last year. We know what the levels were a week ago, two weeks ago and three weeks ago. Is this indicative of the situation under which we have opened our schools?

Mr Hutchinson: To be fair, it is. It is no secret that it would have been preferable for the learning experience to open schools without the requirement for face coverings in the classroom. Yet, on Health advice, based on the numbers over the summer, the Executive agreed that we would retain face coverings for a further period of six weeks, after which their use is to be reviewed. The actions,

mitigations and guidance have reflected the levels of transmission at the time, and that formed part of the decision-making of the Executive as advised by medical professionals. So, in many respects, the mitigations reflect the level of infection and transmission in the wider community.

I reiterate that schools, with the mitigations in place, are safe places. Again, the data for those school-age people reflects the fact that they have yet to be vaccinated, or, rather, that they are unvaccinated.

A positive that we have to draw out here is that many 18-year-olds in our schools have now had two vaccinations, and many 16- and 17-year-olds have had one. Those are very positive steps in terms of infections and transmission, because we have evidence that being vaccinated potentially reduces transmissibility. These are positives. I think that, over this school term, the mitigations that are in place will prove effective. I do not hold that schools are a hotbed of or contributing to transmission. The fact that schools are open means that there are more community interactions. That is a statement of fact. More people are moving about, and they are engaging in school life before and after school. People are mingling in the community because schools are open, and they are focal points for communities. Yes, that may lead to further transmission. The Scottish example showed that association. We have not seen that yet; we do not have the data. No doubt, we will look at that. However, in all reasonableness, we cannot say that the Department's actions — its guidance to schools — are having some sort of impact on the spread of the virus. We are saying that schools remain safe and that you should follow the guidance in the schools. If you are ill, stay away, take a test, self-test twice every week, do what you can as a parent or pupil to play your part, as everyone else in society has been asked to do, and we will try to manage the situation as best we can.

Mr Butler: Is any data coming back, James? We have all been inundated with calls from principals, in particular, about the workload created by having to do contact tracing. Some high-profile schools have sent hundreds of young people home. Has any data come back about the infection level among pupils who have been isolated and sent home?

Mr Hutchinson: We are working with the PHA on that very point. It is data that we would like to get. Elsewhere, we see that the level of infection among the close contacts of a so-called index case is very low. The Scottish model suggests that about 5% of the close contacts of a case in a school ever go on to develop the virus. They cannot form a causal link between the actual index case and pupils developing the virus. The evidence suggests that it is a very remote chance. However, the mitigations in place to reduce that include close-contact tracing and isolation. Therefore, logic suggests that we need to look at that: how many pupils have to be sent home, and how effective that is in limiting the spread of the virus, versus the loss of learning and disruption to the schools, pupils and families. That is the balance that we are looking at.

Mr Butler: You said something a few minutes ago about trajectory or safety. Many of the steps that are being taken are good, but we removed the need to bubble, and what has not changed with COVID, or with any variant of it, is the need to maximise space and so on. One of the issues that has bugged me for a long time, and it has been well covered here this morning, is ventilation.

Mr Hutchinson: Yes.

Mr Butler: What seems to have happened is that the buck has been passed on the responsibility for ventilation. At the moment, the responsibility for the assessment of ventilation, and for the transmissibility of the virus, seems to rest solely with the principals, because they have been given the guidance to deploy in their schools. Principals are not health and ventilation experts.

I have two final questions, if I may. For a year or more, I have been asking about contact tracing. Principals are not best placed to do contact tracing and do not have the resources. Graham Gault, president of the National Association of Head Teachers Northern Ireland (NAHT), has been pursuing that issue for some time. How close are we to seeing an end to that?

My second question is about ventilation. At the start of this week, I received a letter from the Minister that did not indicate that anything substantive was going to happen with ventilation. The guidance needs to shift away from asking principals and boards of governors to make an assessment. An assessment of the adequacy of ventilation across the school estate is needed. No one on this Zoom call does not want our children to be in school. We want them to be in school as safely as possible, and we do not want circuit breakers and gaps where they are not in school, because that will affect children even more. Children have already been through a term and a half of this. Ventilation and

contact tracing could give real confidence to parents, teachers and pupils. It is not just about being in school; it is about being in school confidently and without fear. We need to get on to that, James.

Mr Hutchinson: That is a fair point. The whole issue of the current trajectory of the virus and how we learn to live with it becomes less important as we move on. We will achieve a level of vaccination, and, eventually, to some degree, we will achieve a level of antibodies in everyone's blood system. The way we live with the virus has to adjust. One of the key things that health experts are saying is that there needs to be ventilation and space and that you have to manage personal space and ventilation in rooms. Paul alluded to the fact that we are looking at that as a matter of urgency in the school estate in reaction to the long-term impacts of how we live with the virus. I absolutely take your point on that, and we will look at it in some detail. Paul also alluded to the fact that there are certain things that we can do with mechanical ventilation and so on. We will look at things like air filtration if needs be. That will all be looked at with a view to improving ventilation in school spaces where we can. Do not forget that there are simple things that you can do: open a high-level window; clear the air between classes; and let air in and out. Those are simple steps that do not necessarily need a CO2 monitor. We can improve on those, as well as putting in the technology over time to give effect to ventilation.

Your first point — I am sorry to take these out of order — was on the burden on school leaders. Yes, I have spoken to Graham Gault about that over the past number of days. The matter came up during discussions with trade union colleagues on Monday morning. We will actively look at the burden on head teachers of contact tracing. We are actively looking at it right now, and we are discussing with the PHA, the EA and health officials how we improve it immediately — in the coming days.

Mr Butler: OK. That is fine. The last point is grand. I reiterate the ventilation piece. I know that there are common-sense approaches, but the burden still remains on principals or the estate owner to make an assessment. An expert needs to make the assessment, rather than someone just wetting their finger to see whether a breeze is blowing. It is about confidence building more than anything. I want our teachers, our support staff and our pupils to feel confident in school and to know that everything that can be done has been done by those who know what they are talking about. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Robbie. James, just to go quickly back to one question, are you tracking the number of pupils that are absent from school and the period of days they are absent for?

Mr Hutchinson: We do not have data for this week yet. That will become available on Monday. However, we have the school attendance data, which indicates, for example, the number of people who are ill at a given time because of COVID-19, those who have suspected COVID-19 and those who are isolating. We track that data. We have tracked it since January 2021, so I have that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): So you can give the Committee, in a comparative monthly manner, data relating to pupil absence and the period of days for which pupils are absent?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not have information on the number of individual days an individual pupil is absent for. That is not the way the data is collected. I am sorry. We do not collect it in that way; we collect it at the overall level.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Why is it not collected in that way? Surely you need to know how many days pupils are absent for as well.

Mr Hutchinson: That is data we can mine into. The high-level data we have presented on attendance does not show that, but we can take that away and do some studies on it. We can get colleagues to do that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If you do not know that, you do not know whether one policy is working better than another.

Mr Hutchinson: We will take that away.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, everyone, for the evidence this morning. It is clear that schools still face real difficulties and challenges, and there is a lot of work still to be done. I appreciate your coming here and facing questions this morning.

I want to focus first on the engagement you have had with trade union representatives and school leaders. I know from the briefing note you provided that officials have met both and engaged with them when creating the guidance. If you had seen the Committee meeting last week and heard the evidence that the trade union reps provided about the huge concerns they still have — this is also based on the conversations I have had this week with principals and members of school staff — you would know that they really face a crisis. They are frustrated, exhausted and really at their wits' end. It seems as though you are singing off two different hymn sheets. The guidance you have prepared and offered is not working and is not compatible with what is happening on the ground. Can you tell me what ongoing engagement is happening with school leaders, teaching staff and trade union reps and how you see that going forward?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes, I certainly can. On one level, every school has a co-educational link officer who is provided by the EA and us, so there is a direct link to every school. They provide advice and guidance at the operational level. Kim may want to talk about that in more detail in a moment. At the other, I suppose, more strategic level, we have had engagement with TUS and school leaders all the way through the pandemic. Over the summer, and we are continuing to do this, we discussed operational issues with practitioners — school leaders. We have met them a number of times. We met the practitioners last Thursday. We met the trade unions on Monday. I am meeting both again this afternoon. That is ongoing engagement, and it is really about us trying to work with them as a group in order to take on board their issues and to try to actively resolve the problems that they bring to us. That has been ongoing since the start of the pandemic, and it will continue over the coming term and beyond.

Ms Brogan: It really feels as though you are not getting anywhere with it, though, and that, as I said, you are singing off two different hymn sheets. They are outlining the massive problems that they face and the huge stresses that they deal with daily, and there does not seem to be any change or any kind of support or guidance being offered to them that is different from the initial support and guidance you released. Do you know what I mean? I do not understand what is coming out of the current level of engagement you have.

Mr Hutchinson: There are a couple of practical points there. Our engagement last week led to a change in the PHA and our advice to schools on handling close contacts and contact tracing. That came into effect on Monday. As we speak, we are talking to our colleagues in Education, Health, the EA and PHA about further changes that will be based on engagement with TUS and practitioners. That process is working through. I hope that, very soon, we will have something practical to show that we can put out there as an outworking of that.

Ms Brogan: OK, James. Thank you for that. I want to move on to another point that was raised last week by one of the trade union representatives about monitoring schools and how they are following the guidance you issued. One suggestion was that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) could actually facilitate that and make sure that schools are following the guidance in the right manner. One example that was raised was about pregnant teachers, the risk assessments that schools should get and the fact that those assessments are not being carried through. What is your viewpoint? Do you think schools should be monitored to make sure they are following the guidance correctly?

Mr Hutchinson: In our co-educational link officer (CoLO) process with the Education Authority, the CoLO works with schools to help them through the guidance process. If there is an issue with that, we will work with the school and the EA to resolve it. You made a point about pregnant teachers. Kim, can you provide a bit of information on that? We certainly cover that through the operational guidance that the EA provides on that very point. I think there is guidance on that. *[Pause.]* I am not sure whether Kim has frozen there.

Ms Kim Scott (Education Authority): The co-educational link officer is absolutely our main connection with individual schools. Those officers know their schools and their context, and they have built a very good relationship with our school leaders. We have 85 of those officers. It is cross-organisational, working across the EA, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and the ETI. They provide invaluable support for school leaders as they face what is, undoubtedly, a difficult time. With a supportive nature, we ask our CoLOs to work with our school leaders to ensure in particular that their risk assessments are fit for purpose and are being operationalised.

It is important that individual risk assessments are carried out for pregnant teachers, particularly from 28 weeks. That includes those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) and those with other issues, so we work with them in a supportive way. We have good governance in the CoLO system in that we have an oversight group. Issues are discussed with individual schools and are brought back to that oversight group and through to senior officers.

As James said, we work closely across the EA, DE, the PHA and, indeed, the Department of Health to look at what the presenting issues are. There is no doubt that the huge presenting issue facing us at the moment is contact tracing. That is where we need to put our energies right now. As we move through, other issues present, and that is where the CoLOs can work constructively with the school leaders to ensure that children's learning and emotional health and well-being remain at the forefront of what we do.

Ms Brogan: That is fair, Kim. You are right; that is maybe the priority, but you cannot forget about the rest of the school staff, who need that confidence to go into their work. We need to make sure that they feel safe as well. Although the guidance is there for pregnant women, there are women who were over 28 weeks pregnant who did not receive the risk assessment. That is the point; that needs to be monitored so that those schools can be held to account. Those women should be given the relevant risk assessments and given alternatives, such as working from home or in an administrative role instead of being in a classroom full of children while we are in the serious circumstance of COVID spreading throughout classrooms.

I want to move on to the guidance for nursery schools. James, maybe you can go into greater detail on that. It is my understanding that it is different from the primary and post-primary guidance in that children who attend a nursery do not need to isolate and do not even need to have a test. Is that correct? Can you explain why, please?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes, that is indeed the health guidance for nursery settings. The issue there is the low level of transmission amongst those children. They are very young, and the PCR test requirement is not something that is advised medically. That is the health advice that we apply to the nursery sector.

Ms Brogan: I have been contacted by a principal of a nursery school who is very frustrated by that. They feel that the staff and the children attending the school are being put at risk. Would the Department consider doing the loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) test, which is not as invasive and would maybe be more appropriate for children of that school age?

Mr Hutchinson: What happens really comes from the health advice on testing for that age group, but I can certainly take that question back to Health colleagues and ask about LAMP testing, which, as you will be aware, is done in special schools. The issue is to do with the age of the pupil rather than the type of test. I can take that question back to Health colleagues and see if we can address that.

Ms Brogan: Please do, James. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Nicola. James, on what evidence is the conclusion based that there is a low level of transmission among nursery school pupils?

Mr Hutchinson: I am just trying to find the health advice that was given to us for that. We can come back with more detail. The health evidence that we were given in the past is that the levels of transmission and infection in very small children are lower, hence that advice. I will get back to you in more detail in writing on that and supply that advice to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That would be helpful. I presume the reason why that has been raised with the Committee is because there is some debate on and concern about, or, at the very least, interest in, the policy of no isolation and no testing for nursery schools. It would be helpful if the evidence and rationale for that was brought to the Committee. I would appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr McNulty: I thank the panel today for its important evidence. James, what do you feel teachers, educators, school staff, parents and pupils want right now?

Mr Hutchinson: I am sorry; you broke up at the end of that. Can you repeat the last part of the question?

Mr McNulty: What do you feel principals, teachers, school staff, pupils and parents want right now?

Mr Hutchinson: Certainly, from our conversations with school staff, we have found that they want to be able to operate their schools, get the kids in and teach them in person. Parents very much want to be able to send their children to school. School leaders want to keep their schools open as far as possible and to have children be in the best place for them, which is in school, learning in a classroom. So, yes, I would certainly say that.

Mr McNulty: That is close to the mark, James. They want consistency in the guidance, and they want the guidance to have definitive clarity. They want adequate resourcing, and they want to continue educating children in a safe environment. James, I am going to talk about your calmness and how measured and steady you have been. In the face of tough questioning, you have remained calm, measured and controlled, and that is to be applauded. At a time of crisis, we need that from leadership, so I applaud you for that. That said, James, to say that you are the master of understatement would be an understatement. You described the pressure on teachers, school leaders and principals as "an administrative burden". My God, James, it is more than an administrative burden; it is administrative overload. I spoke to teachers and principals this week, and one described her day on Monday as "a day from hell". Another principal described the situation that he is facing by saying, "The walls are crumbling". It has been really chaotic and almost approaching crisis stations from so many perspectives. We talk about the ABCs in education: I suggest that, in this reality, it is more of an ABCD in that teachers, principals and school staff have gone way above and beyond the call of duty.

James, can you tell me about the flow chart chaos that teachers and principals describe to me?

Mr Hutchinson: I think I can address that, Justin. I assure you that I am very sympathetic about the pressures on teachers. I talked to a number of head teachers this week and heard similar comments. So, yes, we are very aware of the pressure they are under, and we are actively working to relieve that.

I believe the issue you are describing is the advice to schools that came out from the PHA via the EA last week. The new close contact-tracing arrangements are quite complex. Essentially, that flow chart that you describe looks quite complex, and I know that the EA worked closely with schools on its helpline, as did the PHA, in order to take them through the process of what happens when someone is a close contact and what the stages are. It is complicated by the fact that someone's being positive within the last 90 days will affect whether they need a PCR test. Unfortunately, those are just a reflection of the realities of the health situation in terms of how we go through the process of identifying a close contact and whether they need to take a test and subsequently need to self-isolate. I totally accept that. That is a very complex process, and one of the steps we are taking, as we speak, is to try to amend all that in order to alleviate the burden on head teachers, having listened to them and tried to find a solution. So, yes, I totally take that point.

Mr McNulty: Access to not only teaching staff but classroom assistants, cooks in the kitchens and cleaning staff is a major problem. That is not helping with that administrative overload. Can you give me some information on how that is being resolved or on what resolutions are being put in place?

Mr Hutchinson: There are a couple of points there. Certainly, last week we reminded schools that a pot of funding is available. Those allocation letters were issued to schools, possibly on Friday, telling them what their allocations are. That is available to schools to use for things like supporting the administrative costs of contact tracing or, indeed, supporting the administrative costs of running things like providing lateral flow test kits to pupils. That is available.

We would like to see schools looking at how they could make use of the resources in-house if they have some spare capacity. Also, EA — I know that Kim can speak to this — has a pool of classroom assistants that can help schools. There are practical steps that can be taken to help get resources out to schools. Maybe Kim would like to come in on that point about classroom assistants briefly, if that would be helpful.

Ms Scott: Yes. Thanks, James. The EA stood up an emergency resourcing team to support the teaching and non-teaching staff in schools. A huge number of applicants have come on to our register. In fact, we have had 2,877. So far this year, we have had 76 requests from that register of non-teaching staff. The team in the EA is working closely with schools in order to ensure that we have as many staff on the ground in schools as possible as schools need them. That is an ongoing support.

James mentioned the confirmed cases helpline work we have been doing. We stood up that helpline in direct response to the very difficult and unsustainable situation that our schools are in at the moment. Those folk are working to support school leaders across a whole range of the issues they face, including an ability to translate that flow chart into reality and to understand and interpret it better. One of the issues is that, last year, we had a very binary system for close contacts, whereby if people were in close contact, they isolated for 10 days. There are so many nuances in and around that that we are working very closely with schools to navigate. I thank the PHA, which has worked very closely with us on helping to interpret the guidance. A few days ago, we developed a flow chart specifically for parents so that they can support schools as well in navigating their way through that over the days and weeks.

Mr McNulty: Kim, the PHA contact number has been uncontactable for days on end. It was not a help; it was just a further frustration for teachers and principals. That is a big problem. I tried the helpline to verify that, and the message said, "We are connecting you now", and then it said, "Sorry, there is nobody available to take your call". I thought, "Is that really the support that is being given to teachers and staff?". It is bonkers.

You also mentioned giving flow charts to parents. There is a skill in reading flow charts, and some people do not have that ability. The idea that every parent will be able to understand a flow chart should not be accepted or taken for granted. There is a skill associated with flow charts; I hope that there is an awareness of that. James, have you anything further to say on the flow chart issue?

Mr Hutchinson: We will keep it under review. We are very aware of communicating to parents, and we take your point that the flow chart is not for everyone, but, as we develop materials, we will look to make sure that we take account of messages like that. We are very aware that we need to have parents' support in helping us to manage the situation. We will look at that actively.

Mr McNulty: Your impetus is to keep children in school. Is it understood that the two-day-to-10-day testing regime is causing some children to be out of school for longer? The person in a class who initially contracts COVID goes out for 10 days, and their close contacts might be out for two days and then back in. Several days later, they may be back out again. It is potentially keeping kids out much longer than if they went out for 10 days. Is there an understanding of that reality?

Mr Hutchinson: I know what your question is. If you are infected, you are out for 10 days. That is the first case, or the index case. Under the old regime, everybody who was a close contact of theirs would be out for 10 more days, so you would have had whatever the group might be out for 10 days. In the current thinking, we would like a smaller group of really close contacts to be out for as long as it takes to get a PCR test and then to be back in. That should see fewer pupils out for shorter times. If there is a lot of infection in the community, you may find that cases pop up more regularly, but, in our opinion, had you the old regime with the new level of infection, you would have more cases out for longer. That will not be the case. I do not think we will have more people out for longer with this process than we would with the old process.

Mr McNulty: That is a concern from principals. Has any thought been given to child protection and the isolation requirements for teachers and pupils, James? For example, there may be so many children isolating that there is only one girl and a teacher left in a class. What happens in those circumstances? What is the advice?

Mr Hutchinson: Those are matters that schools will manage as part of their normal processes. If there are child protection issues, they will be dealt with at the school level, and, certainly, advice is available from the EA, should those issues arise.

Mr McNulty: Nicola talked about pregnant teachers. One principal I spoke to had a "Safety first" approach, even though he was not required to. He said to the pregnant teachers, "Go. Leave now. Stay out of school. Keep you and your baby safe". What is the advice on that for pregnant teachers? I want to revisit that. Is it very much focused on putting safety first and having precautionary measures to protect the safety of the teacher, the mother and baby at all costs?

Mr Hutchinson: Kim has the detail of that, but, certainly, the advice to employers that was provided through EA contains details on handling clinically extremely vulnerable cases and has specific guidance on pregnant teachers. Kim, will you explain that better than I can?

Ms Scott: As I said, it is based on the individual risk assessment and on conversations between the principal or line manager and the CEV or the pregnant staff member. You are absolutely right: a number of schools advise a member of staff who is at 28 weeks to work from home and will give them duties that they can do from home. It is about ensuring that anybody who is in that situation or who is concerned or, indeed, who falls under a CEV category or is pregnant can have that conversation in which the risk assessment is worked through and the best solution is agreed for that individual.

As I said, we are working closely through the CoLO network to ensure that schools understand and be supported through those processes.

Mr McNulty: How do schools here compare with the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England? How do the rates of transmission and infection in schools here compare with other regions?

Mr Hutchinson: The rate of infection in the community here is high. Scotland has a higher community rate than we do. I cannot quote the rates for England and Wales at the moment. English schools started partly last week and mostly this week, so they have only just come back. Scottish schools have been back for a couple more weeks than ours. They came back in mid-August, and there was significant community transmission in Scotland at that time. I am sorry that I do not have accurate data on school transmission for Scotland.

Mr McNulty: I have one last question. I am a bit confused by this, and I know that parents and principals are too: explain to me what the situation is with lateral flow tests — of which there is a huge abundance in schools, with availability for pupils, teachers and parents — in comparison with PCR testing. What is the point of having lateral flow testing if it does not count for anything? Why have it?

Mr Hutchinson: Lateral flow testing is a self-test. It can be administered by an individual, who gets a result in less than 30 minutes. It is easy; it does not need a laboratory. That is the first point. We have recommended since last term that every post-primary student and every school staff member take a test twice a week, say on Sunday night and Wednesday night, or Monday morning and Thursday morning. If the test is positive, we say, "Do not go to school; arrange a PCR test." That is the guidance.

It is a really helpful tool in keeping infection out of school. If you are asymptomatic, we say, "Do not take an LFT test if you have symptoms; that is too late. If you have symptoms, get a PCR test." LFTs are preventative measures to keep asymptomatic individuals, be they staff or post-primary pupils, out of schools. They can go through the testing process and, if they are positive, they follow PHA advice and the rest of the process kicks in. If their PCR test is negative, they come back to school or work. That is one of the main tools that we have for the coming weeks and months to manage asymptomatic cases and keep them out of schools and workplaces.

Hopefully, that explains where that sits.

Mr McNulty: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): May I briefly supplement that, Justin? James, what are you doing to communicate that to parents?

Mr Hutchinson: The Minister put out a communication to parents before schools returned, underlining the importance of the LFT testing process as part of —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In what format?

Mr Hutchinson: It was placed on the website and tweeted. I think that it was also sent to schools at the end of term. It was sent out through the normal channels.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Normal channels? This is not normal. Justin, that it is a good question: how can lateral flow testing be used effectively? James, I think that your explanation was extremely comprehensible. However, communication of it at community level has been appalling. I am not saying that for effect. Your explanation makes sense and is effective: use lateral flows twice a week if you are asymptomatic, as a good check on whether you need to do anything more; if you are symptomatic, it is PCR.

The leadership level of communication on that is lacking, and that is important — I am not saying that for effect. Those seem like sound principles and approaches, and I would encourage more communication of what seems a sensible practice. However, even though I am involved in politics, I have not heard much communication about it. Maybe my colleagues can back me up. Maybe they were all acutely aware of that approach, but I think that you need real communication on it.

Justin, I cut you off there. Do you want to come back in?

Mr McNulty: Yes, very quickly. I have used a few acronyms. This is a GUBU situation; and you can all look up what that means. The guidance to parents, principals, staff and pupils needs to be 'Sesame Street' simple. Chris made a very important point. You described the lateral flow issue very well. It needs to be clear to parents, pupils, principals and staff alike.

Thank you very much for your evidence today, folks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have a few questions before I bring Harry in, James. I may as well ask them now, given their relevance. Why is COVID PCR negativity at day two deemed a safe period for a pupil to return to school? That is a question that we get asked a lot.

Mr Hutchinson: I do not want to speak as a health professional because I am not, but that is the advice that we have had from Health. After initial contact with an individual, you take a PCR test. If that is negative, you probably do not have it. The reason that you do a second one is that there are circumstances, as I understand it, where the incubation period of the illness can take longer and would not necessarily show up on a day two test; hence the extra layer of taking a second test a number of days later. You are absolutely right: someone who is potentially symptomatic, or, more likely, asymptomatic, after day two could well be in the community or in a school. You are absolutely right, but that is what the Health advice to date has been.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Similar to the previous point, James, there needs to be clearer communication of that. This is 100% for Health as well: there needs to be a clearer explanation of why that is a managed risk. There are, clearly, school leaders, parents and families with clinically extremely vulnerable people in them who have not understood clearly why that is a managed risk. Is that fair? Is that something that can be communicated more clearly?

Mr Hutchinson: That is absolutely correct. There is a balance. The phrase "managed risk" probably is not bad because we are looking at the disbenefits of being out of school for longer versus the very small risk of a pupil being in school in that period and being symptomatic and transmitting the disease. That is where we are. We can certainly look towards working with Health and PHA on appropriate messaging to drive that home.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We need honesty and clear communication of what that risk is. It will not be the same for everyone, either. It will not be the same for a pupil who is CEV. *[Inaudible.]* What alternatives to the current approach to isolation are being considered? The First Minister suggested that lateral flow testing could replace PCR testing. Where are we on that?

Mr Hutchinson: That is a question for Health, as it specifies the testing type. That is not a decision that we take. We are looking at the processes of how you identify close contacts and how the school works with PHA on tracing. Those are the two things that we are working with PHA on at the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I will not labour that.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, James. We appreciate all that you and your team are doing in this high-pressure situation that we all find ourselves in. We want our children and staff to be back at school, but we want them to be safe above all else.

Principals have highlighted that there is not enough support from PHA in terms of contact tracing. Not enough staff are engaged to manage the workload. Nothing is available, or it is closed early — sometimes at 2.00 pm — and closed at weekends. Is 24/7 not more realistic at this time?

Mr Hutchinson: The issue, as Kim said earlier, is that EA's helpline has already extended from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm on weekdays, and there is weekend cover as well. PHA runs a seven-days-a-week service. I commend the efforts of EA and PHA in making those helplines available. PHA has made an

enormous effort for schools. No other sector gets the support that schools get, because of schools' importance in the health environment. PHA's helpline is not something that any other organisation has, and PHA has put resource into it. *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* are extremely pressurised. From our perspective, it has provided amazing support for us and for schools, so, while there may be challenges, I think that we have to commend its efforts rather than criticise the challenges that it faces at this stage.

Mr Harvey: Yes, I appreciate that. Thank you very much. Some schools have said that a lack of local test centres is slowing down pupils' return to school. Could mobile testing teams be tasked to secondary schools in particular that are dealing with excessive numbers of pupils affected at any one time?

Mr Hutchinson: Again, that is PHA territory rather than mine, but I will reflect the fact that, over the past couple of days, PHA sent a mobile testing centre to, I believe, Larne in response to issues. PHA has that capacity for response. I do not want to speak for it in a wider sense, but that is a recent occurrence, yes.

Mr Harvey: OK. How is EA working with schools on the provision of substitute teachers, particularly in schools identified as having a significant number of staff who are isolating? Can central support be provided to allocate subs where a school is under above-average stress because of staff numbers?

Ms Scott: I will take that. As I mentioned, we have an EA resourcing team that has been stood up specifically to support individual schools. All schools have a line and an email into the resourcing team, which they contact. The resourcing team supports them with any resources that they require in school.

Mr Harvey: OK, thank you for that. Testing by staff and pupils must be encouraged on a regular basis. Is there sufficient capacity for that, and is there a steady supply of tests to ensure that schools do not run out?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes. Schools have a completely adequate supply of lateral flow device (LFD) test kits. In fact, an individual can go to a community pharmacy or can go online to the NHS website, and the kits will be posted out the next day. There is no shortage of LFD test kits available.

Mr Harvey: Good. Thank you. Schools have evidenced difficulties in accessing guidance in the past. Has that issue been fully resolved? Is the positive cases helpline quick and effective, or is it under-staffed and over-used?

Mr Hutchinson: We have had pressures, and we have looked at those in the past few minutes of this conversation. We are managing as well as we can. We accept, and the PHA would probably accept, that there have been times when it has not been able to deliver the service that it would have liked, but it and the EA are providing additional resources to try to get through this. We are in a difficult place at the minute with numbers of infections, and that is, effectively, reflected in the access to help. We in EA will put in extra resource. We hope that that will ease over time and that we can achieve an equilibrium as we go forward.

Mr Harvey: That's OK. I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that. All members have had an opportunity to ask questions. Thank you, officials, for your time with us this morning.

I have a couple of final quick questions, James. Larne High School was mentioned. What additional guidance and support has been given to a school such as Larne High School that sees such a significant number of COVID-related isolations?

Mr Hutchinson: Kim may be able to address that. Certainly there is access to the EA support network. Kim, can you elaborate on that?

Ms Scott: Yes, certainly. For contact tracing, the initial response is normally that the principal will phone the EA helpline for support and advice, and that happened in the Larne case. As I said, that helpline has been stood up over 12 hours. It has to be said that the EA and PHA helplines were inundated across the bank holiday weekend, but, as of now, we are confident that calls coming

through are being answered in a timely way. There was a backlog, and I can report that we have moved ahead to resolve it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Kim, you said that when a principal phones, they are offered support. What support is a principal offered in that type of significant situation?

Ms Scott: It depends on what the principal requires support with. Often, a principal will phone to ask for reassurance on interpretation of the guidance.

That is absolutely fine because, as we have said before, it is so nuanced, and it is difficult and it is convoluted. Our officers will talk them through and reassure them or give them direction on what they need to do. Until a few days ago, it was important that all schools contacted the PHA so that it could assist with contact tracing, but principals were reporting to us through our CoLOs and through the support line that some of them have the confidence to go ahead and do the contact tracing themselves.

We issued further guidance last Friday, along with template letters and coding for schools so that parents could book PCR tests. It depends on how much support a school feels it requires. It has support from the EA, from the school cell in PHA, and from the contact-tracing team, which will usually ring it back and talk it through who their close contacts may be. We follow that up with support from the CoLOs, depending on what the school requires, whether that be large groups of pupils having to isolate, blended learning, or whatever other support may be required.

As I said, we also have our resourcing team to support a school such as Larne High School in ensuring that the staff remain. We will talk schools through how many pupils they feel they need to remain at home and for how long and what we can do to ensure the least disruption possible to learning. We try to support as much as we possibly can when schools ask.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that, Kim. To DE, is it correct that, in other jurisdictions, public health agencies conduct the entirety of the contact tracing on behalf of schools?

Mr Hutchinson: That is correct, yes. That is what happens in Scotland, England and Wales.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Why is that not happening in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hutchinson: That is part of the process that we had before. Here, we have retained more mitigations than other jurisdictions have possibly retained, and one of those is the role of schools in contact tracing. Like everything else in the process, it is under review.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): To check that I have understood you: it is not happening in Northern Ireland because more mitigations are in place here and that should reduce the contact-tracing burden. Is the contact-tracing burden in Northern Ireland less than in other jurisdictions?

Mr Hutchinson: It is the other way around, actually. One of the things that we retained as a mitigation was the role of schools in contact tracing as opposed to other jurisdictions that removed that as a mitigation, along with their other mitigations. That is the context.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You intentionally are retaining the role of schools because you think that it is safer than just the Public Health Agency doing it.

Mr Hutchinson: It was with the Public Health Agency rather than the Public Health Agency. Here, the PHA and schools are involved in the process, whereas in the other jurisdictions it is only the public health agencies. That is under review in the light of where we are now.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): To be clear, is it just that that is the way that it is done or is it because you think that it is an additional mitigation measure?

Mr Hutchinson: When community levels were relatively low, it was an excellent way of identifying contacts, and it was not massively burdensome. However, it has become burdensome, and the question now is whether the benefit is worth the burden. We are looking at that, and the other jurisdictions have removed it. Scotland has returned to school without schools having a role in contact tracing.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I think that the Committee has received consistent and clear messaging that it is a significant inhibitor on principals being able to perform key principal roles and responsibilities that the Department of Education would want them to perform

James, I started today by saying that, in this context, the key aims for the Department of Education and the Education Minister have to be safety, in-school learning and contingency planning. When Justin asked you what pupils, parents and teachers want, you did not mention the words "health" or "safety". I found that profoundly concerning. It was just in-school learning. I am a parent, so no one will misrepresent me as giving anything other than high priority in support for children being in in-school learning, but I found your answer really concerning and quite unnerving. Maybe you can reflect on that.

We are grateful for the lengthy time that you have given us today.