



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Priorities

20 March 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Ms Cheryl Brownlee
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason
Ms Kate Nicholl

Witnesses:

Mr Givan	Minister of Education
Mrs Linsey Farrell	Department of Education
Dr Suzanne Kingon	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to welcome the Minister, Paul Givan, and departmental officials to the Education Committee for an oral briefing and a question and answer session. A couple of you have been before us already in this mandate. I will hand over to the Minister for an initial oral briefing of up to 10 minutes, after which we will move to questions from the Committee.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Chairman. It is a pleasure to be here to join you and Committee members, first, formally, in my role as Minister of Education, and, secondly, to meet you as you perform your important roles as members of the Education Committee. Let this be the first of our engagements. I am sure that we will have many more. Of course, I will always make myself available to the Education Committee; that is important. Having sat on previous Committees in the chair that you are in, Mr Chairman, I think that it is important that Ministers give a Committee its proper place. I undertake to do so.

I will move to some opening remarks and will be happy to take questions.

My top priority is to secure a sustained and meaningful increase to education funding, resource and capital. Education is very much an investment. It is truly one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality, and it sets the foundation for sustained economic growth. Education must therefore be a key priority across government, yet, this year, the education sector's opening resource budget was £66 million less than in the previous year. The Department had therefore estimated a funding gap in the region of £300 million throughout 2023-24. I welcome the allocation of

a further £296 million as part of the financial package, which will address that gap. That includes the issue of teachers' pay, on which there has been significant progress. A formal offer was made to the teaching unions on 11 March. I hope that all principals and school leaders will accept the offer, which provides a fair settlement and will make a real and lasting difference to teachers' lives. However, without additional funding in 2024-25, my Department cannot manage the recurring cost of the teaching pay awards and the impact of increased pension contributions.

In addition, funding was not provided to meet the costs of the Education Authority (EA) pay and grading review for support staff. As the Committee knows, the EA advised the Department in February that it had underestimated the staffing figures in the business case submitted to the Department of Finance in December. The Education Authority revised its figures, and the business case was resubmitted on 15 March. My officials continue to work with the Department of Finance to seek business case approval, and I have bid for that additional funding as part of the Executive's Budget 2024-25 process. However, I am deeply concerned that next year's Budget outcome could leave us in an extremely difficult position. Significant additional funding is therefore urgently required to stabilise the education sector.

It is a similar picture for capital investment. Children across Northern Ireland have the right to be educated in schools that are comfortable, safe, of quality and designed and resourced to support their learning. Over the next decade, we need to transform our school buildings so that they are truly fit for the future and can provide the best possible educational experience for our young people. That will require a step change in the level of capital investment and the pace and scale of delivery. The loss of Fresh Start funding has been widely discussed in recent weeks. That funding was long promised to develop and support shared and integrated education and to provide much-needed new facilities. It needs to be returned to the education sector as a matter of utmost urgency.

I have placed the nine integrated projects and the Brookeborough campus into my Department's major capital works programme to progress in planning and design, and I have submitted high-priority bids for those to the Department of Finance as part of the Budget process. I will ask every party in the Executive to support the bids.

To support the delivery of the Strule campus, I have also submitted proposals to ask the Executive to recommit funding equivalent to that removed through the loss of Fresh Start funding. The Strule shared education campus is a new and pioneering approach to the delivery of education provision in Northern Ireland. It will bring together six post-primary schools from the grammar, non-selective and special school sectors on the former Lisanelly army barracks site. The schools will share facilities and deliver a shared and enhanced curriculum. The campus is a long-standing Executive priority and will provide a large-scale model of shared education that will be evaluated to inform the development of education in Northern Ireland over the coming decades. Strule will produce a wide range of educational, societal and reconciliation benefits. It is a key element of the Department's promotion and development of shared education. The Strule programme is at a critical juncture. After a lengthy procurement process, it is shovel-ready with a potential contractor in place, and the full business case is being finalised. However, without the return of the previously ring-fenced Fresh Start funding, the Strule programme will not proceed. Unlike the other former Fresh Start projects, the Strule programme is not affordable solely from within the Department's conventional capital budget.

On special educational needs (SEN), capital investment has an important role to play. My immediate priority is to increase capacity across the education system to ensure sufficient and appropriate places for September 2024. The Education Authority is working at pace to create additional places in special schools and specialist provisions in mainstream schools (SPiMs). The aim is that children with special educational needs will have their school place confirmed at the same time as their peers. That will be challenging this year, and I must reiterate that it will not be achieved without significant additional capital funding for SEN. Not a single additional pound of capital funding has been provided to my Department for additional special needs placements. My officials are also working closely with the Education Authority to expedite planning for special educational needs placements for the future.

We need to restore trust in the system among children, parents and teachers by creating a more responsive system, ensuring children's special educational needs are identified early and that they receive the support they need. SEN transformation must be a key priority. The current system is, quite simply, no longer sustainable. Over the past 12 months, my Department has led an end-to-end review of special educational needs in collaboration with the Education Authority. It identified several priority areas that can be progressed at pace and used to inform longer-term systemic change.

I have also made the development of the early learning and childcare strategy a top priority for my Department, and, in recent weeks, I set out my plans to the Assembly and the Executive. Officials are working at pace to develop a strategy to benefit children, parents and wider society. The dual aims of the strategy are child development and enabling parental employment. We have been looking at approaches elsewhere, but I want a bespoke Northern Ireland model that meets local needs. Any model that we adopt needs to be based on evidence and deliver value for money. It will take time to develop and will require a significant long-term commitment from the Executive. Estimates are up to £400 million per annum, or more, depending on who is eligible and the level of support that we provide. I am also considering short-term measures. We need to stabilise the excellent early years programme, including Sure Start, as a foundation on which any expansion can be built.

Subject to Executive funding, I would also like to move ahead with the expansion of the preschool education programme so that all children can get 22.5 hours of provision in the year before they start school. There is a clear inequality in the current model that needs to be addressed.

I am also committed to delivering an ambitious programme of transformation and progressive change in our education system, building on our strengths, addressing the challenges and working collectively with a range of partners to ensure that every child is happy, learning and succeeding. At the heart of that is investing in the educator and investing in the curriculum. There is nothing more fundamental to pupil outcomes and their educational experiences than effective teaching and learning. Teachers need high-quality professional learning opportunities if they are to meet the complex and developing needs of pupils in a rapidly changing world. Similarly, effective and valuable learning must be shaped around a modern, skills-based 21st-century curriculum.

My Department is working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to refresh the curriculum across all key stages and with the EA to enhance the professional learning offering, including the development of a teacher professional learning (TPL) framework, which should go out for consultation shortly. We are ready to rapidly deliver more, should funding become available. My Department is working with the key delivery partners to consider how we can build on, review and refresh the existing school improvement policy.

Whilst many of the principles of Every School a Good School remain sound, I am mindful that it is now 15 years old, and we need to take account of the significant changes to our education system and society that have taken place during that time. As part of that, we will consider how the intent of the policy is realised, including setting out a clear delivery model for implementation. We must also look at ways to improve the support available to schools and practitioners, making the best use of the data to assist with self-evaluation and improvement and removing the barriers to learning that some of our most vulnerable children and young people face. We must also strive to do better for our learners and provide more effective support for our schools and teachers.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I will touch on school uniforms. School uniform reform is very important and is an issue that I intend to progress quickly. We had a lively debate in the Assembly recently on making school uniforms more affordable, and I plan to launch a consultation in the late spring to put guidance on a statutory basis. That consultation will cover areas such as avoiding single suppliers; minimising branded items, enabling parents to access cheaper, generic items that are widely available; and ensuring that school uniform policies are developed in partnership with parents and pupils. The consultation will also seek views on whether an annual price cap on the total cost of uniforms would be appropriate. I aim to bring legislation to the Assembly as quickly as possible, and I know that the Committee will support me in that work.

I have set out an ambitious programme of reform that will impact — I believe, meaningfully — on the lives of children and young people. Renewal of the school estate, SEN reform and a comprehensive early learning and childcare strategy will fundamentally transform our children's educational experience. However, such a transformation requires the Executive to deliver sustained increased investment in education, and I hope that you will support me as I take each of these issues forward.

Mr Chairman, I am happy to take any questions that you and the Committee have.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Minister, and thank you for keeping to time. It is not always a given when witnesses present, so that is appreciated.

Mr Givan: Pardon the pun: "not always a Givan".

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Well spotted. *[Laughter.]* I should also properly welcome Linsey Farrell and Suzanne Kingon from the Department. It was my oversight not to do so when you arrived. Apologies on that front.

You are very welcome here today, and we have a lot of questions that we want to get through. I will kick off from my end. We heard a lot there about the ambition and the challenges. Clearly, there is a huge pressure on resources, and I think, looking at the budget briefing that you sent through in advance of this session, that it is hard to argue against that when we are looking at a potential £900 million shortfall.

Minister, from your contributions in the Chamber already, we have heard a lot about how you feel that you need other Departments to step up and support delivery of this work and how you need the resource to be made available to you. However, as you are here before the Education Committee, I want to focus on what you as Education Minister will do to move us beyond talk of collaboration and pooling resources to actually make it happen. I want to get an idea of what you plan to do to utilise the Children's Services Co-operation Act. Have you a plan for how you will deliver that sort of work and ensure that Health, Communities and the other Departments in the mix work together collaboratively? Really, I am keen to understand how you will take the lead on that. I do not want to be here at the end of the mandate saying, "We did not get the support from other Departments that we needed." My question to you, Minister is this: what will you do to make that happen, and, essentially, how can we as a Committee measure your success in that regard?

Mr Givan: There are a number of points on that, Nick. We should not need legislation to collaborate across government, but it is there, and, therefore, it is right that we follow that. The Programme for Government, in times past, moved us out of that silo mentality in Departments: we identified the key outcomes, and Departments then fed into what each key outcome was trying to achieve. That forced Departments to identify what they needed to do collaboratively to achieve that outcome, and that is very much part of the process. I will give just one example: on the early years and childcare strategy, I have taken a paper to the Executive setting up a task and finish group. I have asked each Minister to identify a lead official in their Department. My Department will lead that task and finish group, but other Departments are involved in the process. Some Ministers have already identified who that lead official will be. This cuts into the Department for Communities, the Department for the Economy, the Department of Finance and the Department of Health. That ensures that, when it comes to the development of that particular strategy, there is that collaboration within the proper structure of that task and finish group, and that will be a key part of my taking that forward.

That is one example: we have collaboration in that area. However, there are many examples where, in special education, we are actively collaborating with the Department of Health. I visited Fleming Fulton School. We could see at first hand the teaching that was taking place and also, from the Department of Health, the key health staff who meet the health needs of the children. Processes are in place, and collaboration is already happening. Linsey, I do not know whether you want to pick up on that.

Mrs Linsey Farrell (Department of Education): I will just add that the Children's Services Co-operation Act formed the basis of our children and young people's strategy and that a cross-departmental delivery board has been set up to oversee the implementation of that important strategy across Departments. I know that one issue that that group will consider is how we can better draw on the Children's Services Co-operation Act and how we can pinpoint areas where more work needs to be done. As the Minister said, however, there is already effective cross-departmental working, particularly on special educational needs and on the 14 to 19 agenda, with the joint working and collaboration with the Department for the Economy. Good work is going on — of course, we can build on that — and mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is collaboration at operational level between our colleagues in the EA and their operational counterparts across Health and other agencies and at policy level between Departments.

Mr Givan: To reassure members, I will mention that Conor Murphy and I have already had a conversation about the 14 to 19 skills issue, and we will follow up on that. Ministers engage across the areas that interface in the various Departments. You asked, "How do you measure success?". It will be measured in many different ways. For me, measurement of success is based on the individual child. If there is one child in the education system whose full potential is not realised, we are not doing the job that I want us to be able to do. There will be children who will reach their full potential, but others will not. None of us here can say that we are delivering for every child in Northern Ireland. It will depend on your measurement of success, and some of that is also in the gift of other Ministers. In order for me to do my job, I will need the support of other Ministers and the Executive collectively, but I

have no doubt that you will hold me to account according to whatever measurements you decide to use for how we do our job.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you for that. I understand that there is a will and an ambition to collaborate, but I would not say that previous mandates were characterised by really active, meaningful collaboration. Will we move beyond aspirations into the realm of actively pooling resources and delivering projects in collaboration with other Departments, rather than just saying, "We can see that there is crossover, and we will have a conversation"? Will resources be pooled to make things happen? In a number of debates in the Chamber — I understand why — your response has largely been, "I want to do this, but I do not currently have the money". I think of holiday hunger, which we debated yesterday. There are clear crossovers with the Department for Communities and the Department of Health. Are you actively engaging with their officials on how we, with ministerial colleagues, can get a pooled resource in order to deliver the things that impact on the priorities of all those Departments?

Mr Givan: I will gently push back on the assertion that there was not collaboration in previous mandates. That is not my experience. I served as Minister for Communities and as First Minister, and I witnessed collaboration at a very high level, not least during the COVID scenario when the Executive collaborated at a high, strategic level. We developed significant schemes that were rolled out at pace, and, if ever there was evidence of an Executive who collaborated, it was there during what were very difficult circumstances.

On specific individual projects, you will know at constituency level where collaboration takes place in schools and of the frameworks that they operate in to make sure that different Departments link in. Robbie is my constituent in Lagan Valley. We have a process for early years intervention. That scheme is supported by the Public Health Agency, with all the Education principals involved. It includes the PSNI. We support that — it is the Department's responsibility to do so — and there is collaboration. Could it be better? Of course, it could. Do I want to see more of it? Yes, I do. There is willingness there, but collaboration is taking place. I would like to see more of it, but it is not right to characterise previous mandates as having been without collaboration.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I certainly would not say that there has never been collaboration, but, if you speak to anybody who delivers meaningful projects covering any Department's brief, they will say that they find the silo mentalities of Departments difficult to break through. I regularly hear that message. I do not want to labour the point or take time from other members.

I will move on to one other issue. Talking about the need for cross-departmental work and collaboration, nowhere is that need clearer than in the area of SEN. I will put two questions to you about things that you referenced in your opening remarks. The first is about the immediate pressures. How will you ensure that we do not have a repeat in September 2024 of the crisis in the allocation of places for SEN children? You set out in your opening remarks the scale of the challenge. I want to get some detail on what will be done to ensure that we do not see those crisis responses in September 2024 and that there is a smoother transition for the pupils who need those places. More broadly, what assurances can you give our SEN children and their families that your Department will deliver on the promise to reform SEN services? How can this Committee measure success in what you achieve in this mandate in that space? It has been clearly set out as a priority. I think that we all know about the number of reviews, reports and recommendations. When your officials presented, they were clear that there is no space for any more recommendations. We know what we need to do. How, when we reach the end of this mandate, will we measure the success of that longer-term work?

Mr Givan: You are right to highlight the issue of school placements. Last year, as we approached September and everyone else started to identify what school they were going to, there were very challenging and difficult circumstances. There has been work in the Department to try to address that. There is a key strategic group that meets to deal with placements, and it links in with the Department and the Education Authority. The most recent figure that was provided to me was that over 1,000 children still need to have a placement identified at this stage of the school year as we approach September. It is an area that Linsey leads for us in the Department.

Mrs Farrell: Absolutely. As the Minister said, and as I have made the Committee aware, I have chaired that strategic group since November with senior EA colleagues. We are working back from September to avoid the same situation as we were in last year. Last year presented particularly unique challenges. It was the perfect storm. We have seen a steadily increasing trend of children presenting with special educational needs for a number of years now. That trend is not inconsistent with other

jurisdictions, which are also trying to get ahead of the data. Last year, we saw a wave of children coming through in early years and preschool provision who had been impacted most by being born during the pandemic, so they had not been exposed to the early childhood experiences, either in the home or in the broader community, that you would expect. That certainly played into the numbers that we saw last year.

I chair that strategic group monthly. There is also daily and weekly contact between the teams at an operational and policy level around SEN placements. The EA is working very hard on a data dashboard. One of the issues last year was that data was sitting in different places, and we needed to consolidate it to be able to get ahead of the numbers, get underneath them and understand what they were telling us. There is also planning and modelling for the longer term, but our short-term focus is very much on placing those children for September.

We talk about the need for more than 1,000 places. Currently, we expect that to equate to more than 90 additional specialist provisions in mainstream. The EA has written, along with other partners across the education system, to all schools. We really need a collective effort on that. The establishment of specialist provisions in mainstream is consistent with our policy, but we accept that there have been challenges with the implementation. We are keen to give schools that want to be involved in establishing those SPIMs confidence that they will receive sufficient support to enable them to do that and that, most importantly, they will be supported to meet the needs of the children who are placed in their care through specialist provisions. The EA is currently engaged in intensive engagement with schools about the establishment of those specialist provisions. It is also about building on the experience of last year by enhancing early years provision and establishing better partnerships and networks with the voluntary and community sector.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Are we on course to deliver those places?

Mrs Farrell: We have our next meeting with the EA on Monday, and we will receive its latest update then. It is still reporting that the situation is extremely challenging, as the Minister said, and that is, in no small part, due to the funding situation. Urgent additional investment is required to create additional capacity in the system. Unless schools have existing space, those that want to get involved in setting up specialist provisions will require capital support to create those spaces and to enhance, expand or put in modular accommodation. We really require that additional urgent investment.

Mr Givan: Linsey outlined some of that process, and I know that the Committee is aware of the end-to-end review, the 200 recommendations, the 12 work streams and the long-term five- to 10-year strategy to deal with the totality of the transformation that is needed. The short-term pressure is acute, and it has impacted on our capital spend. Suzanne heads up the capital side of the Department. She can give you a flavour of the spend in the past year and of what we will need. I will let Suzanne deal with the figures, in case I put the wrong figure into the public domain for what we need for the next year.

Dr Suzanne Kingon (Department of Education): In the current financial year, we spent £48 million of SEN capital. Our projection for next year is about £70 million. That is on top of our annual recurrent capital budget, which is about £170 million to £190 million. The SEN need is over and above that. So much is already contractually committed that, unless we get the additional investment in SEN, as Linsey highlighted, we will struggle to provide the actual accommodation for the children.

In the longer term, we know that we need to get ahead in capital planning for SEN. We need to put a programme around it and to make sure that we are on the front foot by having new special schools and extending our existing special school provision and the specialist provision in mainstream schools. That will ensure that we are on the front foot and that children with special educational needs get that accommodation. It will, however, require sustained and increased investment in that area at a time when all the needs of the rest of the estate are still there and still important. We have a huge maintenance backlog across the estate. Our major works have been paused. This is an additional and new need, and it needs to be funded as such.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. The question on long-term reform is the only bit that we have not covered clearly. If the parents of a child with special educational needs are watching the Committee meeting, what assurance can you give them that you, as Minister, will deliver on that promise?

Mr Givan: That touches on what I highlighted about the end-to-end review and all those work streams. That work takes a long-term strategic approach to special educational needs provision. We are looking at that. I am also engaging with people who mentioned to me — I think that it was one of the Committee members — the issues with the terminology around children being "supernumerary" and even around "special educational needs". Language is important, and I am considering the use of that language. Other jurisdictions do not use terminology like that. We need to consider that as well.

Changing how we message on the issue will not address the fundamental problems. My focus is on how we make sure that we are doing the transformation work. There is really good evidence and reviews. It is about taking that forward, and that is what we need to focus on.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I have taken up enough time. I will hand over to the Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I want to ask you about educational underachievement. All the evidence shows that we have the highest rates of educational underachievement on these islands, or even, as some may argue, further afield. Children here are no less intelligent or able than children in other jurisdictions, yet we have more children leaving school without qualifications. That has a long-term impact on society, the economy, the health service and even the criminal justice system.

The 'A Fair Start' report was published, and it made many recommendations, but I saw from a budget briefing paper that only £5 million was set aside for their implementation. Will you give us an idea of the status of that report at the minute and of what you intend to do to address underachievement?

Mr Givan: Thank you, Pat. The school that I visited today, just before I came here, was Belfast Model School for Girls, which is a school of over 1,000 pupils, largely taking its catchment from the greater Shankill area. If you are measuring that area on social deprivation and educational underachievement, it will be very high up. When we looked at the academic output, we saw that that school is delivering incredible results, but it is also doing so in the kinds of individual that it is creating. The work that it is doing in transforming lives is inspirational.

Educational underachievement is an important issue, and there will be opportunities to do more to tackle it. We have secured funding to the tune of around £20 million through the Shared Island Fund, and we are in the process of trying to design what that will look like. Moneys will be going into that area. Linsey will pick up on the A Fair Start programme.

Mrs Farrell: Thank you, Pat. You are right that, over the past two years, we have been able to allocate a budget of just over £5 million for implementation of a range of actions against the A Fair Start programme. We accept that that, as you highlighted, falls short of the ambition that was set out by the programme panel. Indeed, the panel has provided a costed implementation plan alongside the publication of the 'A Fair Start' report, but what had not come with the endorsement of the report was the additional investment to then deliver the scale of the ambition that was set out.

We are all well versed on the issues with the Education budget and the significant pressures that it has been under for such a long time because of that sustained underinvestment, and I think that the allocation to the A Fair Start programme is one reflection of that. We have tried to tie that £5.1 million to key projects in the A Fair Start programme that align with the Department's priorities on tackling educational disadvantage. Resources have been allocated within that to the special educational needs early years inclusion service within the EA. An element of it has been allocated to the EA's youth-led Horizons programme. There has been a range of teacher education and projects for the 14-19 age group. Also, we have been able to fund a two-year pilot supporting special educational needs provision and the Belfast-wide pilot project with voluntary and community sector partners. Of course, we would want to do more, and we will be able to deliver the action plan in its entirety, should the additional budget be there to do so.

The Minister referred to the additional funding that has been identified through the Shared Island Fund. We are very keen to be in a place to be able to engage more broadly with that very shortly around the design of the reducing educational disadvantage programme, which was a key a pillar of the A Fair Start programme action plan.

Mr Sheehan: We have heard constantly about the need for more funding, and everybody accepts that there are budgetary pressures. However, there has to be a prioritisation of what is needed in society here. We will have the Mental Health Champion giving evidence to us later. Paul, yesterday, I mentioned some of issues with the programmes that were cut last year. I have mentioned them to you

as well, Linsey. That was the low-hanging fruit, and those were the programmes that were designed to help the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged children in our education system. Given that we have the highest levels of educational underachievement, either the system is failing them or there are barriers or obstacles to young people reaching their full potential. Maybe it is both.

To give another couple of examples, the Engage programme and the Healthy Happy Minds programme were aimed at helping children to catch up in their learning and to help their emotional well-being, resilience and so on. Do you have any intentions to reinstate these programmes? Do you have a more ambitious intention to bring all of those programmes, which amount to wrap-around support for the children who need it most, into the core funding for the education system?

Mr Givan: We have touched on that in debates. Members have submitted a lot of questions on Healthy Happy Minds. A report is to come to me on its outworkings and benefits. Another one that people have contacted me about securing in the future is Bright Start, and another one is the holiday hunger payments. Would I like to be able to fund all those? Of course I would. Do I want to do more in tackling educational underachievement? Those are the young people who need the greatest level of support —.

Mr Sheehan: Paul, my point is this: you have to have priorities. Obviously, those programmes were not a priority for the Department last year. When those programmes were cut, the kids who most needed them to catch up on their education or to support them on mental health issues, as well as the children from dysfunctional families or those who have had adverse childhood experiences and so on, were cut adrift. It is up to you, as Minister, to prioritise where you spend your money.

Mr Givan: Not to revisit the history of it, but the holiday hunger payments had a ring-fenced budget. They had a stand-alone funding stream from the Executive that the Department —

Mr Sheehan: I do not want to look to the past. I want to look to the future. I want to know what you are going to do, not what the permanent secretary did last year.

Mr Givan: Again, the permanent secretary did not have ring-fenced, protected funding. It was DUP Ministers who introduced the holiday hunger payments, and they gave ministerial direction for those to continue. My party has been very clear in its approach to that. There was ring-fenced funding, identified by the Executive. That ring-fenced funding was not there from the Secretary of State. He did not give the Department of Education the budget to fund that.

There is certainly an opportunity to continue holiday hunger payments. That will require the Executive to introduce again the protected, ring-fenced funding that was allocated to the scheme. It did not sit within the Department of Education's baseline when it was first introduced. I make the wider point that it was introduced at a time when COVID moneys were available to the Executive. The Executive had a considerable amount of resource at the time, and they identified that DE could do that scheme, because we had the systems in place through the EA.

I made a point yesterday in the House about the wider context of where we should address such things and about the anti-poverty strategy. It is about making sure that the Executive can do what they want to do in tackling holiday hunger, that people in food poverty get that support and that it achieves what it can achieve. During term time, we can make sure that children get a free school meal. We are not able to control that outside term time and ensure that the financial support results in children being fed. That is left, ultimately, to parents, when they decide to spend their money. It had a ring-fenced funding pot.

I want to do everything that I possibly can to help people. You are right: I will have to prioritise. I have made the case, as part of my budgetary process to the Minister of Finance, for a significant uplift from the Department's baseline, both on recurrent and capital funding. I will await the decisions of the Finance Minister and then the wider Executive. Based on whatever funding is then made available to me, I will have to make difficult decisions. I hope that those are not in the areas that you are raising with me, because they are not where I want funding to be reduced. I want to invest more in that area, but I will only be able to do what I can do with the funding envelope that I receive. Are there any other points that colleagues want to pick up?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Robbie is looking to come in on this point.

Mr Butler: It is just a comment.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If you have a question, I am happy to come back to you.

Mr Sheehan: Go ahead.

Mr Butler: It is just a comment. This goes back to the Chair's point about the underuse of the Children's Services Co-operation Act. I did not get a chance to speak in the debate on holiday hunger. I agree with your point, Minister, that it is not just the Department of Education's lookout in the summer periods. However, it is the responsibility of the Government to make sure that no child goes without a meal during the day. It goes back to the Chair's point that there has been an underuse of the Children's Services Co-operation Act. I tabled a question to the previous Ministers of Education and Health to see how many times it had been utilised.

I am just making a point more than anything, Chair, if that is OK. The full utilisation of that legislation would ensure that children's rights are upheld and that we do not have a child going hungry. I accept that you are under budgetary pressures, but it makes your point, Chair, that, as an Assembly and a Department, we are not utilising the tools that we have.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That point is well made and noted. Back to you, Deputy Chair, if you have anything else to wrap up.

Mr Sheehan: Could I just ask you one question on Irish-medium education, Paul? You will be aware that there are some suspicions about your intentions for Irish-medium education, given your history, but I am happy that we will start with a clean slate here. The Irish-medium sector has a number of needs. It needs investment in accommodation and a workforce strategy, which it has not had, because there is a shortage, particularly of specialist teachers. It needs language-appropriate exams and curriculum material. What can the sector expect from you during your term in office?

Mr Givan: The points that you raise have been raised with me directly by some schools in the Irish-medium sector around their ability to have people in the workforce. It is a challenge to get Irish-speaking teachers. One measure that the Department took when it reduced funding for student placements was to protect the Irish-medium sector. There was no reduction in the number of students who went into the Irish-medium sector. There was a reduction in the number of students in other sectors. That was a demonstration by the Department when it comes to the provision of Irish-medium education and its workforce. Ultimately, when proposals come to me on development opportunities and new schools, a clear process has to be followed. I will follow that process. The principal in Dungannon asked that I would treat the Irish-medium sector fairly and equitably, like every other sector. I will do that. Of course, I will.

Mr Sheehan: I will just come in on that. It is my final point, and is a statement more than a question. You have a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. You have a similar obligation to support integrated education. That means that you do not treat all sectors equally, because the Irish-medium and integrated sectors have not been treated equally in the past. They need to be brought up to a level footing with the other sectors. Because you have that statutory duty, you can make decisions for them that you cannot make for other sectors. That is an important issue.

Mr Givan: Just to expand on the obligations of statutory duties: that duty also applies to promoting and facilitating shared education, and takes in the controlled and maintained sectors. There are quite a number of statutory duties, as I have become very aware, when it comes to decision-making and considering proposals. Suzanne grapples with those issues. Ultimately, advice will come to me on the funding of capital projects, etc, but Suzanne navigates this area.

Dr Kingon: Yes —.

Mr Sheehan: Can I just stop you? Suzanne, you gave us that briefing last week, I think.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We probably need to move on to the next question. Thank you for that.

Mr Brooks: Thanks very much for being here, Minister. Before I go on to the school estate, I just want to expand on some of the SEN issues that we have been discussing. It has been raised with me, and I have raised it here, but I would like to get an answer from you on the issue of mainstreaming SEN elements for all teachers during their training. That is because schools — certainly those that I have

talked to — have experienced difficulties with a shortage of teachers, especially substitute teachers, and feel that, if a bank were created through all teachers having that experience, teachers would feel less intimidated when coming into a SEN environment because they will have had that training, and it would also make it a lot easier for schools to have that covered. What are your intentions around that? Are there any plans to try to incorporate that into teacher training?

Mr Givan: An important point that teachers and principals have raised with me is that the default position for mainstream teachers and schools is that they want to be inclusive and provide the opportunity for children with additional needs to be accommodated in their school. Unfortunately, at times, when they have said, "Yes, we can accommodate this child with various additional needs", they have then felt that the support was not there or they did not have the training to assist them. It is really important that we ensure that, across the mainstream, those who provide that educational experience are trained in that. Again, I defer to Linsey on that issue.

Mrs Farrell: Absolutely. That teacher workforce piece is one specific aspect of the work stream under the end-to-end review of special educational needs and, through that, we are taking forward engagement with the higher education institutions (HEIs) on initial teacher education. The specific point that you raised is one that we are exploring with them. There are differing views, as you might expect, on whether you should go for a specialised route for teachers of special educational needs, whether it is more about building the capacity of all teachers to be teachers of special educational needs, or whether it should be a hybrid, where you have generic training with inbuilt support but you also have a specialist route. We are having those discussions with the HEIs, and we have set up a strategic engagement working group with them. That needs to happen alongside looking at a coherent programme for continuous teacher professional learning, because we know that, once our teachers graduate, they are not the finished article and they need ongoing support, so we really need to look at both of those areas.

Mr Brooks: Thanks very much. I am pleased to hear that it is moving forward. I defer to the experts, I guess, but, to me, it seems sensible that, even if you have a specialised stream, all teachers should have some element of base-level training that means that, whenever there is a need for substitute teachers, they are available at that level. Thanks very much for your answer.

My next point probably links in with SEN, but it is more about the school estate. When I said that I was going to talk about the school estate, my colleague Cheryl quickly raised Carrickfergus Academy with me. Minister, in your first statement to the Assembly, you talked about maintenance works and things that you could do more quickly than building full schools. My first visit to a school was Greenwood House Assessment Centre, which is a special school. That school has damp coming down the walls and paint peeling off. It is in a very, very old house with narrow staircases, and the staff are doing a wonderful job in teaching some of our most vulnerable kids.

I guess that it is about where we want to go with that and what your intentions are around delivering some of that more immediate maintenance of our school estate so that it is capable. I was not here last week, but, the week before that, we heard in one of the presentations that we are allocating kids, as you will know, Minister, to schools that do not have some of the fundamentals, such as toilets, that they need for accessibility reasons. What can we do in the shorter term to ensure that, if we are allocating kids to mainstream schools or, indeed, if they are being placed into schools that deal with the most vulnerable kids, the facilities are fit for purpose and are not another obstacle to their education?

Mr Givan: In my first statement to the Assembly, I outlined the capital investment that we need. You have identified the range of areas that we do invest in, and special education has been a demand-led one that we need to fulfil in terms of our legal obligations to children. That has been getting significant resource and will continue to get significant capital spend. You then have major new builds, and there is a pipeline of works that are at various different stages. I touched on the action that I took around the integrated Fresh Start moneys that were removed, and I have now mainstreamed that into my capital projects. Then we need to have a curriculum-led capital spend because, too often, you will go into a school and the staff will say, "Here is what we need to do on PE, and we do not have a suitable hall", or, "Here is what we want to do in outdoor play", and you do not have outdoor play.

In the context of the scale of the Department's capital spend, some of this involves relatively small amounts of money. It could still be hundreds, if not, in some cases, millions of pounds, but I really want to set about a curriculum-led spend as well as tackle the ongoing maintenance backlog, which all members know is significant and growing. We have been responding to those emergency-type

scenarios. You painted a picture of that school, and we could all recount other examples. I went to Glenwood Primary School on the Shankill. The staff had placed two big buckets in the corridor, and, as I walked through, the water was not just dripping; it was pouring through. You could feel and taste the dampness, yet that is what our children are having to put up with. It is wholly unacceptable. We need to get beyond urgent repairs and have a proper, planned maintenance programme as well as a capital programme that covers a whole range of areas.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Does anyone else want to come in on capital before I move on?

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for the update, and it will be no surprise that I will raise some capital issues with you. You have been bombarded with emails and questions from me. Regardless of the capital estate right across Northern Ireland, in my constituency it is dire. It is critical. Could you give me an update on the school enhancement programme? I believe that it has been frozen and there does not seem to be much progress. I also have significant concerns about the increase in costs from the Education Authority for repairs and maintenance, and the pressure that that is putting on school budgets, which is causing schools to end up in a deficit. How is the Department going to deal with that, if that is across the board?

I previously raised the issue of the pay formula. In some schools in my constituency, because teachers are retained in post, the wages bill is increased. Again, that is putting pressure on schools' budgets. Is there going to be any movement by the Department on that formula?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Please keep answers as succinct as possible because everyone else is still keen to get in, and we are conscious of everyone's time.

Mr Givan: I will do that. Let me take the last question first, on pay. At this stage, there are no plans to introduce a voluntary redundancy scheme. That has been there in the past, whereby, sometimes, teachers at the top of their pay scale and of a certain age are able to retire early and then you can bring in a younger graduate, who is not paid the same. At this stage, there is no plan in place to introduce such a scheme. That will not really give comfort to schools that may be asking for that.

The issue of costs from the EA for repairs and maintenance has been raised with me. Sometimes, a school will say, "Yes, I can source this myself, and I can get it for this amount" or "I can procure this piece of equipment". There are different legal responsibilities that the EA must operate under that are frustrating for people. Suzanne manages the school enhancement programme (SEP) and the issue of repair and maintenance.

Dr Kingon: I will pick up on the school enhancement programme first. As you rightly say, we are not moving any new school enhancement projects into construction. We paused those last April, and have not been able to move them on due to the lack of budget.

What I do want to give you an assurance about is that the Minister has agreed that all those schemes are continuing in planning, so they have not just been parked at a particular point in the process. They are continuing through all the stages, which are feasibility study, business case, outline design and getting their planning permission. They are all dressed up and ready to go to procurement whenever the funding is available.

We are in the budget negotiation process at the minute. We need to see what the budget is for next year. There are many excellent schemes in the school enhancement programme. It is a super programme because it allows you to address in schools those curriculum deficiencies that the Minister referenced without the significant costs of a major new school programme, and can have a huge impact on teaching and learning. I just want to give you that assurance that those schools are progressing.

On the point about maintenance, this year we have, for the first time, ring-fenced £5 million of annual resource maintenance for special schools. Given that we have 39 special schools, that is a huge level of investment. Because they do not have delegated budgets, those schools are entirely reliant on the Education Authority, even for their tenant maintenance, which the rest of our schools would do themselves. They have a backlog, but that ring-fenced money is going to be so important. Already, the impact of that is being felt on the ground, and we plan to bring that forward in the next financial year as well.

In terms of the costs, the Minister rightly referenced the EA provides a different delivery model. The charging that is most impacting on people at the minute is increased costs for grounds maintenance. Unfortunately, the service has had to be subsidised year on year. Given the overall position around the EA block grant, that is not able to take place any more, so schools are being asked to meet those charges. I recognise that there is an issue there, and that is something that we can have a look at.

The other issue about maintenance is that we want to get on the front foot. Our resource maintenance budget last year, at the outset, was £20 million across the whole estate. Ten to 15 years ago it was £35 million. It has been progressively squeezed because of the funding cuts to education. It is an area that needs significantly more investment because maintenance helps avoid larger capital issues. If the maintenance is right at the front end, it prevents the problems from escalating. It is something we are aware of, and we know about the need to plan maintenance and get on the front foot, but it all comes back down to the funding issue. Unfortunately, while the education budget position is like it is, maintenance is an area that has felt the squeeze.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We will move to the next question. Both Cathy and Kate are keen to ask questions on the same area. I will bring in Cathy first, and then Kate can come in.

Mrs Mason: Minister, first, I welcome that you have outlined childcare as a priority. Unfortunately, the feeling I get from the sector is that there is not enough urgency around that. Again, I welcome any support for the sector, and you mentioned interim measures, but the reality is that we should not need them. We have been waiting for a childcare strategy for a long time.

I welcome the bespoke model that you mentioned, but can we get an indication of what that model will look like? The Committee heard from Employers for Childcare on the shortcomings of childcare provision in England and the learning that can be taken from there. There are members of the all-party group on early education and childcare on the Committee, and we have heard about the Scottish model and the Southern model and the positives and negatives. Can we get some more information about what the modelling will look like? I understand that there will be cost options and there will be a process, but can we get an indication of what that might be?

I also welcome the cross-departmental working group, and it very clearly crosses the work of other Departments. For example, the Committee heard from childminders that they do not know whether to turn to the Department of Health or the Department of Education. Ultimately, childcare falls under your remit. Where is the urgency with that group? Has the group met yet? What will its priorities be? I do not want to take up any more time because I know that Kate has other childcare questions.

Mr Givan: It covers a wide range of early years and childcare issues, as you have pointed out, Cathy. I mentioned in my opening remarks that there are two important strands. The first is affordable childcare and early years, and those two will often overlap as well. For example, I want to move to standardised provision for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Currently, 40% of children get full-time places in a nursery school, and 60% of children only get 12.5 hours. I would like to move that to 22.5 hours for every child. Ultimately, I would like to get to the point where we can look at 30 hours provision. That is one aspect that sits completely in my Department, and we have carried out a survey about the providers that are in a position to immediately move to that — not everyone can do that. I will make more information publicly available in due course about the standardised approach to it.

I also mentioned stabilising some of our providers. I met the greater Belfast collective of Sure Start providers, and I know from first-hand experience in my constituency about the excellent work that Sure Start does for children in the very early years, when you can identify issues and link them with Health and others. Sure Start does excellent work, but it is under pressure, and some providers are looking at diminished services. I need to stabilise that. I have included a bid to allow me to do that. That is administered by the Department of Health but my Department funds it. I also want to increase that because Sure Start only operates in a limited number of settings across Northern Ireland, and I want to build on that and roll it out to other areas, because it largely is focused on those areas where disadvantage and need exists. I want to build on that. I have also engaged with the Treasury on the 20% tax allowance, which, as people know, is capped at a certain level for each child. We should be looking to increase that provision. We have reached out to Treasury to see whether that is a more immediate support measure that we would be able to provide.

I have been engaging with officials. I hope to have some interim measures to look at shortly after Easter. Work is ongoing on what I think it should look like, but I am not there yet in the shaping of it. I will need, then, to engage with ministerial colleagues on my views on it. I hope that, shortly after

Easter, I will be able to do that. Stakeholder engagements are being set up with some of the interested groups that are rightly campaigning on the issue. I have already been out with Sure Start providers, and I will be going to other providers, to see the issues that they have. I am keen to hear from them.

There are different views around affordable childcare. Do you give that directly to parents? What would the criteria be? Do you give it to providers as opposed to giving it directly to parents? Providers will say to me, "It isn't just about helping us, because we cannot get the workforce. There is no point in giving us additional funding if we cannot recruit people. Extra money to pay for something is great, but we need to get the workforce".

Those are just a few of the issues that we are looking at. I hope to be able to provide something more definitive shortly after the Easter break — not that I am taking an Easter break; it will be after the public Easter recess. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Mason: May I ask one more really short question?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): A quick supplementary, yes.

Mrs Mason: I agree with you about the work that Sure Start does, but the reality is that it is a postcode lottery. There may be children who are neighbours, and one is entitled to access a Sure Start facility while the other is not. Siobhan O'Neill, the mental health champion, will be with us later. We have rehearsed the SEN issues. In every conversation we have around those issues, we talk about early intervention. How much earlier can you get than childcare settings? I welcome the discussion about Sure Start, but I want to air that caution and reiterate about listening to the sector on the 30 free hours and where we need to go with that, because we hear concerns about it day and daily. You will also hear about the workforce strategy in every setting that you visit. I appreciate that; thank you.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Minister. You will not be surprised that I am going to ask questions about childcare as well.

I welcome the commitment from you and your Executive colleagues. I am concerned that, although it is right that we look at a short-term strategy and then a long-term strategy, there is no timeline for it. Are you able to provide a timeline for a short-term intervention? You said that there will be a report after Easter. My understanding is that the short-term interventions that you are looking at are the stabilisation and expansion of preschool. Are you looking at any other interim support before an affordable childcare scheme is rolled out?

Mr Givan: I have asked officials to consider affordability and whether there is a means by which we can provide financial assistance. That is part of the short-term consideration that I am trying to bring forward, which will be shortly after Easter.

Ms Nicholl: Is that the task force? The task force is looking at the childcare strategy, but is it also looking at the short-term interventions?

Mr Givan: It is, yes.

Ms Nicholl: OK.

Mr Givan: There has been a degree of prioritisation. There are some short-term interventions, because I need to be able to feed that into the budgetary process. As I indicated in the Assembly, the scheme will build on some existing things, and we are also looking at creating some things that do not exist. Whilst the £400 million has been out there, everyone accepts that you would associate that with a long-term, fully comprehensive strategy. That will take time to develop with all the relevant stakeholders and Departments. However, I need to be able to bid for the short-term, interim measures. I need to make sure that I feed that into the budget process, so that we get a budget set at the end of April.

Ms Nicholl: OK. That £400 million is based on full uptake. It will be expensive. I am keen to see costings. Perhaps the task force could also look at what not investing in childcare will cost.

I am nervous about one thing. The standardisation of preschool is really important: everyone agrees with that. I am worried that, because we are focusing on the number 30, moving to 22.5 hours and eventually to 30 will be seen as delivering on childcare provision. Preschool and childcare are not the same thing. What are your views on that?

Mr Givan: I do not disagree with that assessment. That is for children of three to four years. If you could do everything, people would say that you should do it from nought, or certainly from six or nine months upwards, through preschool, day-nursery or childminder-type provision. They would say that, if we want to make that early intervention, we should not wait until children are in nursery school at three and four years of age. Working from children who are three to four years old back towards earlier years is the right thing to do, but it will need an investment. I do not like using the word "cost" for that, because I agree — I think we all agree — that the earlier you can intervene to provide support, the better the outcome for the child and, often, the less significant the state intervention required later in life. It is a win-win when you go for that much earlier intervention.

Ms Nicholl: Absolutely. Late intervention costs, I think, £537 million a year, which is far more.

My final question —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It will need to be very quick.

Ms Nicholl: It will be. I will move away from childcare very quickly. Minister, I am really concerned about children in contingency accommodation — asylum-seeker and refugee children. I am terrified that, in 10 or 15 years, we will have an inquiry into the impact on children of living in that kind of accommodation. They are moved from accommodation to houses and back into hotels, and their schooling is disrupted. Can your Department look into what more it and the EA can do to support those children? That has not been looked at enough. I am very concerned about their well-being and the disruption to schooling that accommodation changes are causing. It is a piece for everyone, including the Department for Communities and TEO.

Mr Givan: Yes. That is an important point. I will bring Linsey in.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You will have to be brief, unfortunately, even though it is important.

Mrs Farrell: Thank you, Kate. We work very closely with TEO on its strategic response around the placement of children, with the EA at an operational level, with the Housing Executive and with others. We have highlighted the range of concerns that you have, rightly, brought to our attention about what are, it has to be said, Home Office policies on the movement of children, often with very little notice. It can be difficult for the EA to secure school placements, but we can give you the commitment that we will continue to work closely with TEO and the EA on that and on highlighting those concerns.

Mr Givan: I have a story from my family's experience, which frustrated me as a constituency MLA. My parents hosted a Ukrainian family. The children were in the same school, in the Dickson plan area. They wanted to stay and go to the school there, but, when it came to moving and accessing a bus pass for transport provision, they were told that their closest school was in Lisburn, and the Education Authority would not cover the change in transport. That was a significant amount of money for that family. I was deeply frustrated by the response that I got from TEO and the Department of Education. People are coming here under very difficult circumstances, and we should make sure that they do not encounter even more barriers when they are here. I will engage further on that issue, Kate.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have a big agenda. I will go to Cara, Danny and Robbie, in that order. You will each have one question and an answer. You need to be quick.

Ms Hunter: Minister, thank you so much for being here today. I appreciate your answers. My question pertains to safeguarding and supporting children with special educational needs. I want to ask for an update from your Department on the issue of restraint and seclusion. I recently spoke to a passionate parent who has advocated on that for a long time. They touched on the issue of non-verbal children and explained that being non-verbal can often cause children more difficulties in communicating that they have experienced inappropriate restraint or seclusion. I would like an update on that. Thank you.

Mr Givan: I have provided some answers on that. I am waiting for more engagement with officials on the subject of restraint. I am not sure who the lead is on that.

Mrs Farrell: I can give you a quick update on that, Cara. You are right. These are really emotive and complex issues. We are working incredibly closely with the Department of Health and other health colleagues on guidance in this area. It is about striking the balance between what is right and in the best interests of the child and what is deliverable in an education setting. Education settings are often very different from health settings. We hope to put fuller advice to the Minister very shortly, on foot of the consultation, and to publish a report soon, once the Minister has had a chance to consider that advice.

Ms Hunter: Do you have a timeline for that report?

Mrs Farrell: We will put something to the Minister in the coming weeks.

Ms Hunter: Thank you very much.

My final question is for the Minister. In the Assembly and the Executive, we have talked at length about violence against women and girls. We know that Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places to be a woman. If we want to tackle sexual and physical violence against women in our society, it is really important that there is early intervention to tackle sexist and harmful attitudes towards women and girls. Minister, how do you think we can tackle things such as rape culture, rape myths and those kind of harmful attitudes towards women through education? What do you see as being the role of education, in our classrooms, to tackle that?

Mr Givan: There is a hugely important role for education in that. Schools, and particularly boards of governors — I sat on three boards of governors: two primary and one post-primary — need to ensure that they address the issues as part of teaching, which is often a safe space for people to have those conversations and discussions. There is a big role for education in that. We will always support schools in how they want to teach and what areas of the curriculum they want to cover. It is then for schools to make sure that they have those policies in place, and the boards of governors will have an important role to play in that. It is important that schools make sure that they cover those issues, that they do so sensitively, and that the governors take a particular interest in that. In the post-primary school in which I was a governor, we, as governors, always took an interest in it.

Ms Hunter: Would you like to see the key aspect of tackling violence against women and girls being mandatory in secondary education? Do you think that there is a role for our universities? Do you think that that aspect should be mandatory in those first few days of university, to ensure that students get the chance to learn the key information about ending violence against women and girls?

Mr Givan: Instinctively, I would want to cover that. I then look at the way in which our education system operates. We always give our boards of governors a large degree of autonomy to make sure that they can cover things. Some boards of governors may believe that this issue should be mandatory, but others will say to me, "I also want this to be mandatory and this to be mandatory". As a Department, we support the education system — our schools — and give them flexibility so that they can cover these issues. I would expect them to cover these issues, but we need to support them in doing that. Schools need to make sure that they cover it, but we always respect the autonomy of a school when it comes to how they will deliver the curriculum and cover the areas that are within their responsibilities.

Ms Hunter: Do you think that there is a role for universities in that, as well?

Mr Givan: You are inviting me to get into another Minister's responsibilities.

Ms Hunter: It is for the Department for the Economy, but I am just asking for your personal opinion.

Mr Givan: Tackling violence against women and girls is a societal issue. It is across the board. When I was Chair of the Justice Committee, I took forward legislation on criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services. At the time, the Justice Minister did not support me in that; I will leave that there. I recognised that we needed to send out a message, to wider society, that women are not a product or a commodity that can be bought. When I was in a school and we debated that issue, the attitudes

presented by some boys were striking. They were saying, "We should be able to do it"; the girls were the first ones to get up to say, "Absolutely not". There was a discussion around that.

We, as a society, need to address these issues wherever we are. There is a place for education to manage it, and there is a place for our universities in all of this. I do not think that I am saying something that Conor Murphy would disagree with me on.

Ms Hunter: Thank you. I am mindful that, if pupils do not have that conversation during secondary education, then universities or further education may be the place to have it.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I agree. We will hear from the mental health champion and from our young people in our next two evidence sessions today. There may be different views as to whether leaving that to the discretion of schools is the right approach or whether we need something mandatory.

I hand over to Danny, and I emphasise that the clock really is ticking.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Minister. My question is about youth funding. Had I more time, I would sit here and convince you that it should be a number one priority for additional funding. However, we do not have that time, and I know that budgets are very tight and decisions have to be made. My ask is for a review of how the community and voluntary sector is funded by the Education Authority. I raised this a couple of weeks ago, when we had correspondence on specifications.

I will just set out a wee bit of the back story. We have had a number of good debates on motions related to this in the past couple of weeks. I mentioned yesterday that Monkstown Boxing Club runs its own holiday hunger programmes. Saints Youth Club in my constituency also runs a programme. That was funded by Urban Villages, but it ends this week and is not coming back. St Patrick's Day and Feet on the Street are funded by Belfast City Council. There are all these different wee pots that the community and voluntary sector has to rely on. If we give it those funds, the work that it contributes is far and above that amount. Community and voluntary sector organisations are always praised, but they are the ones that always have to fight for funding.

These questions could have been very different. It was only last night that their core funding letter of offer came in; it was due to run out in 11 days' time. I welcome that they got that last night, but the programme specifications are not out yet. We have not seen them yet. I believe — I hope — that those will go live on 1 May. However, staff have no job security and are leaving the sector.

Mr Givan: I ask you to get to the question, Danny.

Mr Baker: The question was really to ask for a review, but I have set the backdrop to it.

Those organisations are not on a level footing with the statutory bodies, including the EA, which does great work as well. The community and voluntary sector faces insecurity. I had a quick read at the specification: there is a 2% uplift for the cost-of-living crisis, but, within that, management committees will have to find money for the uplift in Joint Negotiating Committee and National Joint Council pay scales. That is pressure that will be coming on to youth clubs. In the youth club that I volunteer with, we made decisions at Christmas, when it was really cold, to change our days or reduce our hours, because there was no money in the reserves to kick on and put the heating on. Those are the challenges.

It is a simple ask to review how our community and voluntary youth clubs are funded. To this day, the EA is still their funder, collaborator and assessor. Until quite recently, the EA also chaired the local advisory groups and regional advisory groups, so there is a real accountability question there as well. That is my question in a nutshell, but I needed to give that backdrop to it. Those organisations do great work, but they really struggle when it comes to funding.

Mr Givan: It is a good question, and you rightly set the context. It draws on my experience of youth provision at a local level. I was not happy with the outworkings of the change in youth services by the EA. It affected a youth group in Moira in my constituency. Robbie and I worked unsuccessfully to try to secure funding for that group. I did not find my engagement with the EA Youth Service, as a constituency MLA, to be positive. That concerned me, and I came into this post with that experience of Youth Service provision.

There is competing tension between statutory and voluntary. Where the community and voluntary sector can deliver that service, it should deliver it and the statutory sector should step back. The EA is operationally responsible and my Department will give it the funding, but I believe that, where the community and voluntary sector is able to deliver these services, it is often best placed to do it and will provide greater value for money in how it goes about delivering them. That is the general principle by which I will approach youth services, but the EA is responsible for accounting for, administering and managing expenditure in that area. I agree that we should support those organisations. We are looking at the outcomes and processes and how the EA goes about delivery.

Mr Baker: Perfect. I want to quickly flag up — Linsey, this has probably come across your desk — the Tackling Paramilitarism programme funding. I know that it is under DOJ, but that runs out on 31 March as well. We are then into high-risk areas for children.

Mr Givan: Danny, the funding —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We will have to follow up on that one up in writing.

Mr Givan: We will follow it up.

Mr Baker: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We move to Robbie. Time is absolutely of the essence.

Mr Butler: I heard you right up until you talked about time, Chair. I will just turn my back to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am conscious of other witnesses, Robbie.

Mr Butler: I have three questions, Minister, but I will ask them in short form. Make sure you have a pen and do not miss them, or I will have to come back to them.

Mr Givan: I will do that.

Mr Butler: When you first spoke in the Chamber, I raised the issue of children's rights impact assessments. Paediatrics in the health system is the first place that I would like to see that established. Has the Department had any discussion on how it will address policy or legislative change and, perhaps, employ a children's rights-centred template? When we bring legislation forward, whether that is a private Member's Bill or it comes from you, we should not take away from any child. We should not take away from one child to give to another. You do not help any child up by putting another child down.

My second question is about the independent review, which chats about the value of GCSEs as a terminal exam. It is a very interesting piece. I do not know if you have grappled with that yet, but I would like to know if the Department is looking at moving away from GCSEs. The recommendation is to look at something different from those exams for 15- or 16-year-olds.

There is not enough — this is not about you, Minister; it is about the whole Executive — chat about looked-after children. What will be you and your Department's strategy? What level of importance will be given to ensuring that looked-after children are not forgotten and, indeed, that they have the best opportunities in life?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Robbie. Minister, this will have to be very brief because we are way over time.

Mr Givan: I appreciate that. I probably cannot give brief answers to those three questions.

On children's rights impact assessments, what I am hearing from you is you asking whether we will carry out a children's rights impact assessment when it comes to education policies, similar to the way in which we carry out a rural impact assessment. My default answer is that everything that we do has the child at its centre. How do we measure that? It is an interesting question. Can we encapsulate that in some formal structure such as a children's rights impact assessment? I will come back to you on that.

Your question on GCSEs —

Mr Butler: The independent review suggests that GCSEs were designed at a time when a lot of children left school at that age, whereas, now, more children go on to further and higher education, and there is more of an emphasis on A levels and vocational qualifications. The inference is that, perhaps, we are putting young people under pressure at that age when we do not need to, and it does not actually bring huge value. I do not have GCSEs, but that was a different generation.

Mr Givan: Changes could be happening in England around recognition of qualifications, which I picked up on with the UK Secretary of State for Education.

Mrs Farrell: The GCSE issue is within the context of broader issues around qualifications reform that we will be grappling with over the next while. We will be putting advice to the Minister on the advanced British standard in England, which he referred to. That is at A level, which is a surprising development because other jurisdictions have started with GCSEs, and GCSEs are what has been highlighted in the independent review. However, that is just one issue that the Minister will consider within a broader suite of advice around qualifications reform.

Mr Givan: There was also the question about looked-after children.

Mrs Farrell: We can come back to you in writing with a fuller response on looked-after children. We support and fund the Education Authority's Primary Children Looked After Advisory Service, which provides direct support to schools for the looked-after children population. We will come back to you in writing with a more detailed breakdown of how many schools that service works with and the activities that it is involved in with those children.

Mr Butler: On looked-after children, it is in the existing Programme for Government. It is about working with universities to try to increase the number of young people from a looked-after background who get to university. If that is a high-level Government priority, I just want to make sure that the Department of Education is getting traction on it. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Minister, Linsey and Suzanne, for attending today. I hope it is the first of a number of engagements. Thank you for being so generous with your time. There is plenty to follow up on.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Chair and members. As I said at the start, I am happy to make myself available to the Committee whenever you so desire.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is appreciated.

Mr Givan: I might regret saying that. *[Laughter.]*