



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mr Paul Givan MLA,
Minister of Education

12 June 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
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason
Ms Kate Nicholl

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I apologise for keeping you waiting; we ran over a little. Thank you all for attending. I welcome the Minister of Education, Paul Givan; Ronnie Armour, deputy secretary, resources, governance and early years; Linsey Farrell, deputy secretary, education policy and children's services; and Suzanne Kingon, acting deputy secretary in the Department. We appreciate your giving up your time for the Committee, and it is good to have you back before us. No written briefing has been provided, so I invite you to make the initial presentation of up to 10 minutes, after which we will go to questions and answers. We will aim for five minutes for each question and answer for each member. We all have a lot that we want to say, but let us get to questions and answers as quickly as we can so that we can get into the detail of the issues. Thank you, Minister.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Chairman. Just over four months ago, on 3 February, I became Minister of Education for Northern Ireland. Since my appointment, I have made it clear that I intend to set a fresh direction for our education system for the next generation. Devolution is about making a difference, and I have hit the ground running in Education.

My first priority was to get out and meet people and to address issues that could not be resolved in the absence of local Ministers. In the first 100 days, I visited over 30 schools, including schools across every county and sector, as well as numerous preschool and other education community settings. I have now made over 50 such visits, and the most recent one took place two hours ago at Millennium Integrated Primary School. In doing that, I have been deeply impressed by the dedication and hard work of our school leaders, teachers and support staff. That is why I was delighted to have secured the funding made available by the United Kingdom Government on the restoration of an Executive to resolve the long-running industrial action by teachers.

To date, I have made key interventions: let me turn to them. On special educational needs (SEN), I recently announced the biggest step change to education planning for children and young people with special educational needs for a generation, with an ambitious and far-reaching programme of investment in facilities that will transform the education and lives of our most vulnerable children and their families. As the end-to-end review of special educational needs reaches its concluding phase, I intend to set out year-1 actions to rebuild confidence and capability across the system. That will set out a clear direction of travel and a clear implementation plan for system-wide reform. Those proposals will form part of the wider departmental bid to the newly established, albeit interim, Northern Ireland Executive interim public-sector transformation board. Sustained investment to deliver the fundamental reforms that are emerging from the end-to-end review is essential to that work.

The Committee will be aware that the position on placements for children with special educational needs for September of this year remains challenging. In recent years, we have seen an unprecedented rise in the number of children who require specialist provision, and, to date, planning has been on an emergency footing; quite simply, demand has outstripped supply. However, I assure the Committee that my Department is supporting the Education Authority (EA) in a significant programme of work to seek solutions to the capacity issues in the system. The current position is entirely unacceptable and must change. The experience of the past few years has led the Department of Education to take decisive action to ensure that, for 2025 and beyond, proactive planning for the placement of children with special educational needs will be completed in line with projected need. My officials are working closely with the Education Authority to ensure that there is adequate forward planning based on projected need for specialist education provision. That will break the cycle of the emergency planning that has been experienced in recent years. I am optimistic that, this time next year, we will no longer be in a position in which a large number of children remain unplaced.

I have announced an ambitious package of measures for early years learning and childcare, representing the most significant enhancement of early years investment in Northern Ireland in decades. I have delivered on my commitment to prioritise early learning and childcare and welcome my Executive colleagues' agreement to my package of measures for 2024-25. I believe that those measures deliver a good, balanced package within the £25 million of ring-fenced Executive funding that was secured. The package that I have constructed will see an additional 15% affordability subsidy for working parents with children aged from nought to four; funding to stabilise the sector and enhance vital services, including Sure Start, and support for children with additional needs; the commencement of standardisation of the preschool education programme; support for childcare providers; and data collection to provide the comprehensive and authoritative information that is not currently available. Operational details, along with the wider implementation of the package, are being taken forward by the cross-departmental task and finish group through targeted engagement with key stakeholders on a co-design basis. Some measures, such as the stabilisation and expansion of existing programmes, can proceed within weeks, while others will have a longer lead-in time. I plan, however, for those measures to be operational from September 2024. My Department is fully focused on delivering the package within the challenging time frames outlined. I have also now received the final report of the preschool education programme standardisation scoping study, which I intend to publish in the coming days. I will write to the Committee about that as soon as possible. I will continue to work with Executive colleagues to build on the positive start and to effect the long-term reform that is needed in early learning and childcare.

I very much regret the impact that the industrial strike action by support staff has had on the education and well-being of children and young people across Northern Ireland, especially those who attend our special schools, where the effect is felt most acutely. The Committee will be aware that the Executive could not allocate funding for the pay and grading review as part of the 2024-25 Budget. However, they agreed to seek approval from His Majesty's Treasury to re-profile some of the funding that was provided for future years as part of the financial package, and that is currently being considered by His Majesty's Treasury. Given the upcoming election, there is uncertainty as to when we might get a response from the Treasury to that request. Therefore, we have been engaging with trade unions to discuss other options that might resolve the pay and grading dispute. The discussions to date have been positive, and I thank the trade unions for their cooperation and participation in those negotiations. The suspension of strike action scheduled for 3 and 4 June was an important step in allowing us the space in which to work on a potential settlement. I assure the Committee that I will continue to do all that I can to resolve the long-running dispute.

On school uniforms, as the Committee will be aware, my overarching aim is to ensure that all school governing bodies put affordability, comfort, sustainability and best value at the centre of their decision-making when they set their school uniform requirements. My officials are working through what needs

to be included in the primary legislation that I will bring to the Assembly. It is my intention that the legislation will make the guidance on school uniforms, which is currently voluntary, statutory. All grant-aided schools will then have to take account of it. Having statutory guidance in place will give parents and pupils a more direct input to what school uniform requirements should be, while respecting the position of schools in terms of reflecting their ethos through their uniform. Further detail will be set out in the consultation on uniform policy, which is due to launch in the next week, and I will await its conclusion. I want to make sure that the legislation is comprehensive and provides clarity about the statutory guidance. I look forward to the support of all parties as we start the process to take that important legislation through the Assembly later this year.

In respect of the budget, of course none of this can happen without funding. In the absence of the now Executive-agreed opening budget, I provided interim planning budgets to the Department's arm's-length bodies (ALBs) for the purposes of ensuring a level of business continuity. With the budget now agreed, I am finalising my Department's 2024-25 budget strategy. The Department's arm's-length bodies include the Education Authority, which will be notified of its 2024-25 final opening allocations in due course. The Executive-agreed budget provides my Department with a resource budget of £2,874.4 million. As I mentioned, in addition, £25 million has been set aside for a childcare strategy, which is to be held centrally, pending the Executive's approval of proposals brought forward by the task and finish group.

The Department, having bid for £777 million of funding, has been allocated £297 million. That is significantly less than is required, and it leaves a considerable shortfall across the education sector. Given the size of the funding shortfall faced by the education sector, I have asked my finance directorate to urgently commission a 10% savings exercise across the Department of Education and our non-departmental public bodies, including the Education Authority. That will assist with determining the options available and what difficult decisions are required to offer the education sector the best chance to operate within budget.

In the absence of significant additional funding, the budget position for my Department will be extremely challenging. Investment in education has long-term social and economic benefits for all of society and is critical to building future prosperity. It must be a key priority across government.

Mr Chairman, thank you for allowing me to make those opening remarks. I am in your hands for the duration of the meeting and am happy to take questions on any issues.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Minister, for those opening remarks. Many, if not all, of the issues that you highlighted have been clearly identified by the Committee as its areas of priority, so you will probably find that there will be questions on all of those.

You referenced the return of the institutions and how you have taken on a job of work since coming into post. We all want to be clear, given the crisis that is facing education, that it is absolutely welcome that the institutions returned. We all need to be clear that the education system could not sustain another collapse of this place. We need a stable Government in Northern Ireland. I know from speaking to school leaders that their fear remains and, while the prospect of the institutions coming down remains, they will not have a sense of security or confidence in their leadership and funding. Again, I urge all parties to coalesce around a commitment to keep the institutions on a stable footing, because education really cannot cope with another period of uncertainty coming down the track.

There is an awful lot there that I would like to pick up on. There is no way that I will be able to cover everything that you have raised. You will be well aware of our focus on SEN. Since the return of the institutions, the Committee has covered that in every evidence session without exception. We have focused very much on the immediate crisis in placements. I ask for a brief update on where we are with September, and I will then broaden that in order to think a little more about transformation. First, give me that initial update on what the immediate picture looks like for September.

Mr Givan: OK. As of this morning, 72% of all children with a statement of special educational needs requiring a new or change of placement have had their places confirmed; 95% of P7s; 46% of P1s; and 25% of nursery children. We expect the figures for the numbers of children with a confirmed place to increase significantly next week, as P1 and preschool places in particular continue to be confirmed. I indicated, when I took up my post, that about 1,000 children would not have a place come September. That figure now sits at 400, so we have made significant progress in reducing those numbers.

We are at a more advanced stage at this point in the year than we were last year when we faced into the need that had to be addressed. That has come about by means of the direct intervention of my Department, engaging with schools, seeking confirmation that they would be willing to take placements, surveying the estate and mapping need to make sure that it is not about just creating a place; it is about the right place. We are on a positive trajectory. It is still challenging, but, from where we were when I took up post to where we are now, we have made significant progress. I absolutely accept, however, that, for families who have not had a confirmed place, that needs to be addressed. We are working through the processes to get those confirmations, and we are making significant progress.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): How many pupils, do you anticipate, will be unplaced as of September? Do we have any sense of what that number is likely to be?

Mr Givan: Our target is zero. That is the target that I have instructed the EA to achieve. I met the chief executive of the Education Authority. That is the target that it is working to. We are being briefed daily on placement numbers. As a Department, we are proactively engaged to support the Education Authority in that. Our target is that no child will be unplaced for the start of term in September. I would love to give an absolute guarantee that I can achieve that; we are making significant progress towards it.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The Committee shares that aim of no children being unplaced, and we emphasise the need for them to be in the right place with the right support to meet their needs. We all agree that we have not been in a good place on this for a number of years. The process that we have been engaged in, leading up to this September, has not brought us to where we want to be. I commend the work to address that, and the level of engagement should be acknowledged, but we really must not be here in September 2025. I could probably just play a recording of what I said at the previous Committee meeting, but that remains our position. Next year, we will certainly want to scrutinise — from September right through the year — what is happening with placements, because, although a focus on placements in itself will not resolve the issue, for the children in the system, that is what matters to them in the here and now. I emphasise that.

I will move to the transformation aspect of this, which is an area that we have not had the opportunity to really scrutinise, because we have been on a crisis footing. The Committee is keen to move, after recess, into a scenario in which we can look at that work in more detail. There are many things that we could ask about it, but, Minister, you have talked about a lack of confidence in the capability and capacity of the system to deliver for children with SEN. When I speak to parents, that is what I hear. I met a group of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in my constituency, and I really valued that input. My summary of the engagement was that they were a demoralised workforce. They feel that they are administering a system rather than delivering for children and that their time is spent on bureaucracy. They feel that the time that they spend on their meaningful input into delivering for children is substantially less than the time that they spend administering a system to keep it running. It was quite a dispiriting conversation. The professional commitment was there, but the lack of confidence in the system was palpable. We have to be aware of that context.

Where do we go from here? Minister, can you outline for the Committee what you are committing to in order to deliver SEN transformation over the course of the mandate? We appreciate that it might be a 10-, 15- or 20-year journey, but in your post, in this mandate, what are your commitments for delivering on SEN transformation? How can we measure your success?

Mr Givan: There is the end-to-end review and all the work streams in that, which we are taking forward. When I announced a new capital programme for special education, that was also about looking strategically at how, over the next 10 years, we ensure that, in that school estate — the 39 schools — where there needs to be enhancement, we enhance; and where new schools are required, such as Knockevin and Ardnashee, we take them forward. We believe that Northern Ireland needs eight new special schools: four in Belfast and four in other parts. That is part of making sure that we have the right estate for special schools.

Obviously, as we know, some of the children with additional needs, given that there are tens of thousands of them, are in mainstream schools. How do we make sure that we support them? That will largely be addressed through the end-to-end review and all the various work streams within it. We also have the challenge of recruitment and retention. I can touch on that in more detail. We need to get a resolution on the pay and grading review. We also need to find better career pathways for people who come in as classroom assistants. How can they progress, advance and get opportunities?

We will take a multiplicity of approaches to addressing special educational needs. Linsey heads that up for me. Linsey, do you want to touch on it?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will be very happy to hear from Linsey, but I want to emphasise that the Committee welcomed the capital announcements. They are welcome, but it would be good to get a sense of how soon those schools are likely to be delivered. We in education are all aware that capital announcements can be made but that we can wait years with no ground being broken on-site. How quickly can they be delivered? We have been aware of the need for additional special schools and for expansion of the special school estate for a very long time, and there has been minimal progress on it. It would be good to get a timescale.

The capital investment in the special school estate is one part of this, but there is a systemic problem here. As a Committee, we would be really keen to move beyond people saying, "Trust us. An end-to-end review is taking place". When will we see actions? When will we see timelines? When will the parents who need the system to work, the children — crucially — who need the system to work and the educators in the system notice change? When will they feel that this is different from what we have had before and that this is a system that is functioning, that is child-centred and that works in a collegiate way across Departments and agencies to ensure that the needs of the child are being met? That is the test, so I would really like to get some specifics. What do you seek to achieve, and how will we measure success?

Mrs Linsey Farrell (Department of Education): You will be aware that we are approaching the end of the second phase of the end-to-end review. That involves extensive engagement with parents, schools, practitioners and other Departments. We know that so many of the issues that impact on and are impacted by special educational needs relate to other Departments, so that is another important piece.

As the Minister said in his opening comments, we are working on a transformation proposal. That is what is required for the special educational needs system. The system was designed for a different context from the one that we are in. That is what you will hear when you engage with schools, and it is certainly what we hear when we engage with principals and practitioners across schools.

Our end-to-end review is focused, and we are developing an outcomes framework that will have clear outcomes for the right support, at the right time, in the right place and from the right people. Chair, you rightly mentioned that capital is just one part of the picture: that is right, and that is what we are trying to encompass in the approach to transformation.

The "right support" is about early and timely support and early intervention in the classroom as soon as a need presents. That raises the question of not only the need for ongoing teacher professional learning but a review of the content of initial teacher education to look at how our teachers are equipped from the get-go to address the needs of children in their classrooms. "Right time" is about early intervention so that there are not lengthy processes to go through for a parent and child to receive the support that they need. Often, during that time, needs become more complex and difficult to address. "Right place" is about bringing in the capital element and ensuring that places are there in both mainstream and specialist provision, as well as having the capital to meet the needs of children. "Right people" is about the capacity of our system: our teaching and non-teaching workforce and how we draw in much-needed skills and expertise from the health workforce to respond to needs.

We are developing a five-year transformation plan, and we hope to be able to come and talk to you about that very soon. It will set out a number of key actions, but those are dependent on additional investment. We need to continue to meet the needs of the children who are currently in our system while we are transforming that system. We also have to recognise that there are statutory obligations that must be met for our children now. We need that additional investment to enable us to change this.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Nobody on this Committee doubts the challenge involved in, first, working to administer a system that, as it stands, is not functioning well, and, secondly, delivering a really meaningful and transformative programme of work so that that system functions for all children. None of us on the Committee would quibble with that. It is important to put on record that we do not underestimate the scale of the work. We are not here to say, "Right, we want this resolved. When we come back after recess, can we get started?". We understand that challenge. What you have articulated feels to me almost like a restatement of the issues. We know those issues. This is about the Committee getting a sense of when we will hear what the actions are and how we will measure success. When we have our final Committee session of the mandate, what will you — the

Minister and the Department — be telling us has changed? What are you committing to deliver meaningful change on?

Mr Givan: In my opening remarks, I outlined that we will be putting in a bid to the transformation board that the Executive have set up. It is vital that we are successful in that bid. You rightly challenge me on what I am doing. We are putting forward clear actions. I have indicated that I will lay out the year-1 actions that are needed for wider system reform, but that will be predicated on our securing funding to do that as part of that transformation work.

We have set about the work of addressing special educational needs provision. Where that happens in schools, it happens very well. I was at Millennium Integrated Primary School, which has specialist provision in mainstream schools (SPiMS). The principal spoke highly of how the school operates specialist provision in a mainstream setting and of the benefit that it brings to young people. It is important to say that excellent work is taking place across our schools, but the system is facing increased challenges, and the need will continue to grow. How do we meet that need? We are addressing that in the short term by building the capacity for over 1,000 children, and we are well on our way to doing that. We will address other issues that need to be resolved, but we need to get the support of the transformation board, as part of this interim measure, to allow us to make the kind of changes needed to resolve a lot of the issues.

You are all familiar with the challenges of getting classroom assistants. I speak to principals, and I commend Integrated College Glengormley on being an excellent example. It pools the hours of some of the young people who have moved into year 8 and employs full-time teachers as opposed to a multiplicity of classroom assistants. There needs to be a change in the culture and attitude that the best educational outcome for a child is to have a one-to-one classroom assistant. There absolutely are circumstances in which that will be required, but, if you speak to some principals whose schools are making that change, you find that the better practical educational outcome has come from pooling those hours and employing teachers. We need to ask how we can disseminate that information so that other schools are aware of it and have the flexibility to take the approach that I witnessed in a number of schools that I visited.

Significant work is taking place. Capital is one aspect of it. We direct the EA, as we have done, to prioritise special educational needs. I am dependent on the EA being an organisation that can carry out the requests that we make. You asked when the Committee will see that work and what stage it is at. Suzanne heads that work up, and we are assessing all 39 schools and taking forward new school builds. Suzanne, you might be able to give more specific detail.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If I may just come in there quickly, it is probably appropriate for me to declare an interest before we move on: my wife teaches at Millennium Integrated Primary School, and it has been held up as an exemplar of good practice.

Dr Suzanne Kingon (Department of Education): I will just say about SEN capital that you are quite right: it takes time to get from the beginning of planning to a new school. We recognise that the eight new schools that the Minister referenced will take a number of years, but that is why the SEN capital programme that was announced has a number of work streams, one of which is ongoing earmarked maintenance for special schools. Another, which the Minister referenced, is that we are reviewing all 39 special schools and seeing whether any of them need an extension or refurbishment that can be put on the ground more quickly. There is no straightforward answer that everything will be delivered by x date. It is a phased programme, and we are making sure that we are getting it right in the short term through maintenance and minor works, improving the facilities on the ground and ensuring that the right equipment is there. For example, we have put in a capital grant for all new specialist provision settings to buy new equipment when they open. That is really important practical stuff on the ground that will actually impact on children's lives.

SEN capital had always just been part of mainstream capital planning. We have taken it out and made it into a specific programme. We have given it focus, emphasis and priority, with a range —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The Committee has been clear that we welcome that.

Dr Kingon: — of work streams. The answer is that money is being spent on the ground today, this year. The Minister has allocated £52 million of the initial opening capital budget for SEN capital. That will primarily be for accommodation for September placements, both modular accommodation and modifications to existing classrooms etc to get them up to the spec to open specialist provision. That

money is already being spent on the ground. As we work, we will phase in. Obviously, the new builds take longer. The extensions and refurbishments have a shorter time frame. The money is out there on the ground at the minute. We very much welcome that. As Linsey pointed out, continuing the momentum around the SEN capital also very much depends on future funding. This year, we secured an additional £60 million for education capital. That is what will make the difference to funding SEN capital. If that is not maintained over the next decade, we will not be able to deliver the programme in the way in which we want to.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Before this session, members had a briefing from the independent review of education panel. The warnings around budget and education were stark. We are very mindful of that. I just want to close off that line of questioning by saying that we will absolutely come back to the issue and will seek that action plan. We will seek that programme of work coming forward, because, as was mentioned, we cannot exist in a cycle of crisis management. We have to find a way in which to break that cycle. The Committee will be resolutely focused on that from here on in.

I will ask the Committee's indulgence for one final question, on a different issue. The issue of pay and grading has been raised. I do not know whether it will be raised by others. I simply want to put on record that I really hope that a resolution can be found, because it is critical to those issues. I want to ask about a separate industrial relations issue regarding teachers and principals. We all welcomed the delivery of the pay deal for teachers. At that time, it was understood by the unions that it was about pay: that was what needed to be resolved in order to move things on. My understanding is that recommendations have been made in nine key areas around the workload of teachers and principals. Eight of those have been completed, but I am not aware of any actions that have arisen from them. One remains with the Department. The Committee would be very concerned that we could move out of one period of industrial action into another. My sense from speaking to principals and teachers is that they feel that this is absolutely critical. They feel that they are extremely stretched, that their schools are under-resourced and that their workload is rising. Seeing their capacity to deliver the work reducing and what is being required of them increasing is not a good combination. I just want to ask a brief question: Minister, can you commit to ensuring that you will prioritise that work to address the workload of teachers and principals? My concern is that we could face a further period of industrial action, which the school system, clearly, does not need right now.

Mr Givan: That formed part of the agreement that was reached with teachers when we settled the dispute over pay and workload issues. We are proactively making sure that we can take those forward. Ronnie, you may want to touch on that issue. I am very much committed to making sure that that area is dealt with, because I recognise the pressures that principals are under, and I agree with you, Chair, that, having come out of industrial action and action short of strike, we do not want to return to that space, because it is hugely detrimental to the running of a school. A one-day strike is less disruptive to the improvement of a school's performance than action short of strike that incorporates non-cooperation with the inspectorate.

We have a pilot up and running of seven schools that currently have the inspectorate in. That will report at the end of the month, and it is intended that that will roll out a full inspection programme, with over 200 schools planned to be inspected from September for the next academic year. If we are to help, it is vital to be in schools, identifying areas of best practice, sharing that information and being able to provide support and assistance wherever schools need it. We have made sure that the inspection process has been changed to make it more supportive. Action short of strike prevents that, and I want to make sure that any issues or barriers are addressed.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Is there a commitment that those reviews will be addressed and that that issue will be addressed in the short term?

Mr Givan: Yes, we are working through those.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I asked for a very short answer: a yes or no. Will it be addressed?

Mr Ronnie Armour (Department of Education): We are working through the detail of that, and engagement continues.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Could we hope to have something concrete on that by the end of the year? We are conscious that some of this stuff dates back to 2020.

Mr Armour: We absolutely appreciate the urgency. We will continue to engage with our trade union partners and will reach a conclusion as quickly as we possibly can.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I urge you to do so. That is great.

Mr Sheehan: I have a couple of questions around specialist provision in mainstream schools. I think that 100 schools have offered to set up specialist provision. Is that accurate?

Mrs Farrell: It is an iterative process. More than 700 schools responded to the letter and the survey, and that engagement is continuing.

Mr Sheehan: OK. Fair enough.

Mr Givan: Linsey, you can correct me if I am wrong, but I think that over 300 schools gave a positive indication that they wanted to provide additional support — some of it for this year and some for next year — through specialist provision in mainstream schools.

Mr Sheehan: OK. One of the fears is that, while physical spaces will be created in schools, there might be a shortage of personnel to provide services for children, particularly allied health professionals such as behavioural therapists, OTs, speech and language therapists and physios. There is a fear that there might be a shortage of that type of support. We on the Committee are getting the impression that the Health Department is not pulling its weight on that. Can you comment on that?

This is the second part of my question. Over the past number of weeks, we have had some discussion around the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015, which empowers Departments to pool resources and funding and so on. Have any bids been made for extra funding, particularly with the Health Department?

Mr Givan: I will pick up on a couple of those points. On the subject of health support, I was with Mr Brooks at — was it Greenmount?

Mr Brooks: It was Greenwood House Assessment Centre.

Mr Givan: Apologies. I was with Mr Brooks at Greenwood House Assessment Centre, which takes children up to P2. That is a really good example of somewhere where health workers are located full-time to provide support for the children in the school. I can see how that works well. In other settings, such as Fleming Fulton School, staff employed by the Belfast Health Trust are located in the facility to provide support to people who have complex medical needs, and I see that that works.

Our concern has been that, in some of the more mainstream settings, there has not been the kind of support that we think can be provided in a school setting. That is partly because of the health trusts: they indicate that they have a shortage of staff to provide that. I am, however, absolutely of the view that schools are the best place to have the educational component while also meeting the health component. That could be to do with speech and language and communication or it could be to do with behavioural issues, but that is where we need to have a better system in which the two Departments, the trusts and those localities work together more closely. That is an issue of concern that principals have raised with me. We have a high-level collaborative process with the Department of Health to try to address those issues. Both Departments will say, "This is what we want to do," but it is about how that operates at the school level. Certainly, some evidence has been presented to me that schools do not feel that there is the support that there could be from the health trusts, but the trusts may have justifiable reasons for why that is not the case.

Mr Sheehan: I suppose that the difficulty, Paul, is managing to convince parents whose children should really be in special schools — they cannot, however, get into a special school because there are no places available — of the merit of placing their children in specialist provision in mainstream settings. If the support is not there, you will get a backlash from parents as a result.

Mr Givan: That is right. That is part of the issue. If we are to build up capacity in mainstream settings, parents need to have the confidence that that is the best place for their child. I spoke this morning with parents who had wanted their children to go into a special school because they felt that that was where they would be best supported. Those children are going into a mainstream school, but the parents have been able to get assurances that that will work for them and their child because of the

support that will be available in a mainstream setting. The general thrust of the policy is towards mainstream settings, but there will always be a need for stand-alone special schools in Northern Ireland, and that is why we are trying to enhance existing provision and create new capacity, so that we can meet those needs.

Mr Sheehan: Have there been any joint bids?

Mr Givan: In relation to the Children's Services Co-operation Act? I am not aware that we have had to use that legislation as the basis upon which we need to make joint bids. There are examples where we work hand in hand with the Department of Health and do not rely on that legislation to do so.

Mr Sheehan: Have there been joint bids, irrespective of the Act?

Mr Givan: Sure Start is an example where we fund a scheme and the Department of Health delivers it. We fund and develop that programme, but the Department of Health administers it. We bid for that exclusively as the Department of Education, albeit it is administered by the Department of Health. I am not sure whether there are joint bids per se.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): May I come in on the back of that? The emphasis has been on the lack of resource in Education. These things are cross-cutting and involve Communities and Health. Is there not an argument that utilising the Children's Services Co-operation Act to pool resources would allow you to do the things that you say that you are not resourced to do at the moment?

Mrs Farrell: There are collaborative elements to the five-year transformation plan that we are developing. We are working with the Department of Health and, indeed, the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy on health supports but also on the transitions piece when children with special educational needs leave school. There are collaborative elements that we are working on, but the reality is that Health will speak of very real workforce pressures in the area of allied health professionals. We have met the Chief Allied Health Professions Officer about the establishment and expansion of specialist provision. Health is very aware of that issue and the impacts of it. We are exploring how, through teacher professional learning and looking at that capacity building across the workforce, we can look at universal, targeted and specialist provision. However, the reality is that there are those workforce pressures in the health system. As the Minister said, Health is a key partner in the transformation programme on special educational needs, and we are working very closely with Health on these issues.

Mr Sheehan: May I ask a quick question about Healthy Happy Minds? I have had correspondence from Action Mental Health, and it asks whether, given that the evaluation is now with the Department, you can give any clarity to community and voluntary sector providers about what will happen in regard to either Healthy Happy Minds or some replacement for that.

Mr Givan: It was a pilot. The Department has been reviewing the evaluation of that, and the feedback has been that it was impactful and positive. Is that the best means by which to take forward issues around mental health in schools? There is a broader question of whether Healthy Happy Minds is the vehicle through which to do that. Of course, that still takes me back to some of the funding aspects of what we are facing as a Department when it comes to spend. The evaluation is there. How we continue to provide support for schools is a real challenge in this area, and Barnardo's is not able to continue some of its support, because schools have been buying that in directly. We are not in a position to do that for schools because of our financial constraints. Was it a good scheme? Yes is the answer that I have had from my officials. Would I like to see something of that nature rolled out again and expanded? Yes, I would. Do I have the funding to do it? Therein lies the problem.

Mr Sheehan: Is there any timeline for when a decision might be made?

Mr Givan: We have commissioned work on what a 10% reduction in funding across Education looks like. Officials have not yet provided me with the detail on that, but an exercise has been carried out. That will lead to reductions in services as opposed to any enhancement of services across education. I am putting forward a significant bid as part of the June monitoring round. That is why we have not finalised the budget allocations in the Department and its arm's-length bodies. I need to and will make the case to Executive colleagues for Education's need for funding. We are on a projected overspend of £215 million. The impact of that on the education sector is significant, to say the least. The reality of

it has not crystallised yet, but it will do so after the conclusion of the June monitoring round, and I will then know what funding is available to the Department.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Minister and panel for being here today. We have talked a lot about the link between education and health, and I have a few questions about ADHD. ADHD is recognised and defined as a learning difficulty caused by neurobehavioural challenges that creates challenges with focus, communication and memory. How do the significant delays in access to an ADHD assessment in Northern Ireland impact on the educational outcomes and achievement of our young people?

Mr Givan: That speaks to the broader point, Cara, about earlier intervention: the sooner you make the intervention, the sooner you can provide the support. Whether the assessment is required for ADHD or in any other area, we know that there is a real challenge when it comes to the availability of psychologists, for example, to do that. The time frame and the referral system have become real challenges. Principals whom I meet indicate that the parental process of seeking referral has overtaken school-system referrals, and I have received feedback raising concerns about that. The school would have been in a position to identify, on the basis of its assessment, children who should be put forward for a psychological assessment, but the bandwidth for the school to do that has reduced because parents are much more informed. We have, by providing the portal, made referral more accessible to parents, but that is creating an issue. Principals feel that their educational assessment is being trumped by the system and that children who should get assessment ahead of others are having to wait. Do I believe that assessments should be carried out as early as possible? Yes, I do, and the sooner they can be carried out, the sooner support systems can be put in place.

Ms Hunter: Is that a topic that you discussed with the previous Minister of Health or the Health Department? I am mindful of young people not getting access to the support and, potentially, the medication that they need to focus, which will undoubtedly impact on them. If not, will you have those discussions?

Mr Givan: Yes, we have discussed that.

Mrs Farrell: We have a joint Health and Education oversight group that meets routinely, specifically on special educational needs but also, indeed, to bring in broader issues relating to, for example, the interface between early years in health and education. I cannot say definitively that the specific issue has been discussed, but I can certainly explore that. That is the type of issue that forms the basis of the agenda of those meetings, and it is certainly one that we can bring to that group.

Ms Hunter: I recently spoke to ADD-NI, which said that it was totally overwhelmed. Every trust has a different approach, and I am mindful of that trickling down to a child's education experience.

My final question — I am mindful of the time — is, as the deputy chair of the all-party group on suicide prevention, about the undeniable link between bullying and suicidal ideation. Department of Education representatives recently talked to us about the strategy for addressing bullying in schools. I and, I believe, the rest of the Committee have significant concern about the lack of monitoring when it comes to data on the reasons for bullying, and we heard that there was a sort of opt-in approach when it came to boards of governors. I know that we want to respect aspects of autonomy for our boards of governors, but I was really concerned, because I felt that there was a lack of oversight of the health and well-being, including the mental health and well-being, of our young people. I would love to know your perspectives on that. Do you believe that anything in that could be changed to ensure that we stop bullying as best we can and recognise the types of bullying that go on in our schools?

Mr Givan: We take that issue extremely seriously, and so does the Assembly, given the fact that it passed legislation on bullying that put clear responsibilities for those issues on boards of governors. We continue to emphasise its importance.

There may be some issues around data collection on incidences of bullying and how it is reported and published. That could create almost a league table, which may present concerns for different reasons, because if something happens, there may be public naming and shaming of schools. People might say, "Oh, you are the top school for bullying in Northern Ireland", and so on. There are issues in how the data is published, but those should not relate to efforts to make sure that we have that information in order to know where the issues are and how we can support schools to address the matter. Linsey, do you want to comment?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Please do so very briefly just to finish off that answer.

Mrs Farrell: As the Minister said, we are very aware of those data-collection issues and how that data is used. There is an understandable nervousness across schools about how that data is used. We know that it is not always as simplistic as equating high numbers of bullying incidences to there being issues in the school. It could show an openness and a transparency in addressing those issues, as well as a desire to do so. We are conscious that the Department would like to do some additional research on the implementation of those measures, but, again, it will be subject to the budgetary exercise and the availability of funding to take that work forward.

Ms Hunter: Thank you.

Mr Brooks: Thank you, Minister, for your attendance here and for your earlier visit to East Belfast.

In the previous session, the independent review of education panel was with us. Kate was pitching your job to potential future applicants by asking them what they would do or prioritise if they were Education Minister. Dr Bloomer said that he would spend his time as Education Minister convincing others of the benefits of increased investment in education. He said that the answer to stabilising the workforce is money. Robin McLoughlin talked about our being on a "precipice", because the education system will be bankrupt very soon, with most schools projecting an overspend of 10% this year, 20% next year and 30% the year after. We will come to that precipice unless there is a change in the quantum of money. You addressed some of those pressures in your answer to Pat, but would you like to comment on some of those statements, the Budget allocation and what you are doing to argue for more for Education?

Mr Givan: Thank you, David. I agree about the need for additional investment in Education. Whilst we made some progress on our capital side, which has allowed us to advance a number of new projects, the resource side continues to be very difficult and challenging. We are facing real challenges as a result of a £200-million-plus shortfall in our budget. Again, it comes back to the wider Executive and the decisions that they will have to take. I will advocate my Department, but I know that others will advocate theirs. The Executive will have to take collective decisions. We cannot be a Northern Ireland Executive for one single Department. All public services need to be supported.

Whatever my budget, it will create difficult decisions for me to take, but it is my responsibility to try to make sure that we can do that within budget. A policy of overspending is not one that is credible for the Executive, particularly when funding from the Treasury is dependent on our being fiscally responsible. We will look into that at June monitoring. I know that several hundred million pounds are available for allocation in the June monitoring round. I could take all of that, but I know that I will not get all of it. Other Departments may be able to take all of it as well, so we have to approach it maturely and try to work our way through it.

Do I believe that teachers need to be invested in? Yes, I do. Investment in their professional development and enhancement in their career opportunities is needed. However, if we want to make sure that the next generation is getting the best possible opportunities, the single biggest asset that we have is our teachers and support staff, and they are not paid enough. When I look at the private sector and then at the shortages that are in key roles in schools, such as in teaching computers and information technology, I see that some science and maths teachers are able to get much more pay in the private sector, but we need them to be in our school system.

Yes, we need more investment. We need more investment in our school estate. I echo what the independent review panel said. I spent a number of hours with its members. I went through its report, and we discussed those issues. However, we also discussed the curriculum and how to make sure that it is relevant in meeting and achieving the needs of today's society in not only developing well-rounded individuals but preparing them for careers, so we talked about how we can make sure that the curriculum achieves that. So, it is not about just money, although, yes, we need resource. We also need to make sure that what we are doing with what we have is relevant and up to date. The expert panel had a lot to say on that.

Mr Brooks: To follow up, Minister, in some of your answers you were leaning towards —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Could you be brief, David?

Mr Brooks: — the idea of not only softening transitions but greater recognition and value being given to alternative routes in education, such as vocational subjects and what was discussed at our recent

link-up concurrent meeting the Economy Committee. As we discussed then, traditionally, university, particularly in grammar schools, has always been seen as the gold medal and everything else is lesser than. We want apprenticeships to be better valued and routes through even the private sector now for school-leavers. The independent review panel talked about that, but how do we put other subjects in schools that encourage down paths those people who are perhaps not suited to the traditional subjects that we value more than others?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Very briefly, Minister.

Mr Givan: Schools have been broadening their curriculum offer. That is where collaboration with further education is vital. Not every school should have a sixth form. That is where you have your area learning communities and you make sure that you can link in with your further and higher education college. They can potentially deliver a course for children who are coming from your school, or you can collaborate with high schools in your community. You can share, and that is part of shared education.

Sometimes we want to have everything in our own facility, whether that is a school or college, but you are not going to be able to provide that in a constrained financial environment. However, can you share that provision? Can you build a curriculum around that and timetable it in? There are good examples of where that is happening at post-primary education level, but we also need to look at it at primary-school level. Currently, there is a barrier to area learning-based communities at primary-school level. I have met a number of principals, and they said that they need to be able to have that in order to support each other at that level.

Mr Brooks: That is encouraging. Thank you.

Ms Nicholl: Minister, I want to start by thanking you for your work on childcare. Although it is innovative, £25 million is not enough for what is needed. You know my views on preschool and childcare anyway, but outside that, it is really good work, and I commend you and your officials for it.

I have submitted a number of questions for written answer, and I know that the answer is that the task and finish group is looking into this and that answers will be brought forward. However, parents are asking me when they will know more about how they should apply for the subsidy scheme, how providers apply for the emergency fund and if childcare vouchers will be included in that. While the task and finish group is looking at it, will you commit to releasing information as and when decisions are taken as opposed to releasing it at the end of the process so that people are up to date and have confidence that the scheme will be ready by September?

Mr Givan: That makes eminent sense. Where information can be provided when a decision has been taken on whatever aspect of the strategy that we are taking forward, I am not going to wait until September to then say, "Here's the process". Work is being taken forward on the scheme and administering the childcare subsidy aspect with Employers For — give me the title, Ronnie.

Mr Armour: Early Years.

Mr Givan: Apologies — Early Years. There are Employers For Childcare and then there is Early Years.

Ms Nicholl: Early Years did the COVID payments, so it already has the system in place.

Mr Givan: Yes.

Ms Nicholl: OK, so it will be delivering it.

Mr Givan: That is the body that we are working with to provide the childcare subsidy to providers. Again, I am dependent for some of that on organisations outside my Department. When I look at the childcare providers that may need that intervention in order to stay open, I see that the task and finish group will look to the Department for the Economy to provide support to develop all that. Not all that is strictly in my Department, so that is why, through the task and finish group, we have pulled in different parts of the Executive to help me in that. Absolutely, as more information crystallises, I will share it. The announcement was made, and the detail is there. It is about giving operational effect to that detail. It will be challenging to achieve it in

September. It was challenging when I first met officials and said, "This is a priority, and it needs to be done by June". They said, "Really?", but they were able to do it. All our effort had to go into developing it, and now it is about giving effect to it. Of course, I will release time frames and more details when I get them.

Ms Nicholl: That is definitely reassuring. When I heard that the task and finish group had not met that many times and that the subsidy scheme had to be put in place by September, that made me nervous. I know, however, that Early Years has already delivered a scheme and that it has the software in place, so that is encouraging.

I met a preschool principal last night who said that anxiety among young children is at an all-time high. What can the Department do about that? You said that people can feel it and see it but do not know how to support those young people, especially post COVID. That anxiety is at a level that they have never seen before.

Mr Givan: Do you mean in general in preschool? That has come through, particularly post COVID. Separation anxiety is a particular issue. It is about how we support schools and preschools to deal with that, which I want to be able to do. I will need to come back to you with the detail about whether there are schemes in place that allow us to do that. I want to give you an answer that I can stand over on that. Anxiety levels are certainly higher at every level, be that in preschool or in primary and post-primary schools. I visited Glenlola Collegiate in Bangor, which has a new well-being centre, if I am right. It had a prep department that the staff have been able to change to a well-being centre. They said that the use of the centre, post COVID, has been significant and that now they would not want to do without it because of the support that it provides to people who are in a post-primary setting.

I will come back to you, Kate, with more detail on how we support preschools with children who have anxiety issues.

Ms Nicholl: OK, thank you very much. Do I have another minute?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Very briefly. You have a minute.

Ms Nicholl: In my defence, I was not trying to give your job away. *[Laughter.]* I asked the members of the independent panel what, based on their expertise, if they were in your position and given the limited budget, they would prioritise. They said that childcare is good and that convincing people to invest in education is important. They mentioned curriculum reform, encouraging collaboration through area learning communities — we touched on that — and making a start on proposals to reconfigure the school estate, which has the potential to make savings. How much work is already being done in those areas?

Mr Givan: I do not disagree with the independent panel's suggestions about what the priorities should be. We are doing those and more. Obviously, special educational needs is one area that it must not have mentioned. That has been given a top priority for us to address and deal with. We are taking forward provision in all those areas. It is difficult for me to say what is a priority, because so many things are a priority.

When I visit schools — I have now visited over 50 — I fundamentally see my job as supporting our principals and teachers to do their job as effectively as possible. I look at the policies that we need to have to do that. How do we give operational effect to those? What are the barriers that they face? Where there is frustration around procurement rules, for example, how do we make that easier and simpler for schools? We are working with the EA and hope to be able to take forward something on that. There is a lack of support in addressing HR issues in schools, and many school principals are frustrated by that. I have heard a lot about the challenges that they have, and it is about how we work through addressing those.

Nearly all those things do not require new legislation. Some people will judge an Assembly and a Minister on the legislation that they bring forward. A lot of this work does not require legislation; it just requires us to have effective policies and to give them operational effect. I am so dependent on not only the Department in so many other aspects of the education system so that I can do that but on other Departments, because we link in with the Department of Health. How can we make all those things work? That is the challenge, and we are taking it forward as best we can.

Ms Nicholl: I guess the point is that you cannot prioritise everything.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Be brief on this one.

Ms Nicholl: You have done good work on the childcare piece, but it is understanding that SEN is a key part of that. What will be the core focus?

Mr Givan: The investment in the estate element, as are our resources. The teachers issue has been resolved. I spoke to a principal this morning who said that her son has qualified from Stranmillis; I think that the notification with the results will come today for students. She said to me, "He is going to stay in Northern Ireland. He was planning on leaving", but, because we changed the starting salary from £24,000 to £30,000, he will stay. That has helped to create a better pool of workers who are available to go into teaching.

I want to address everything, but, of course, there will always be key priorities. I have outlined the priorities, and they will be to take forward special education, developing the capital programme, maintenance programmes, the teachers' pay issue, resolving the pay and grading dispute, and creating stability in the workforce. I also intend to take forward an assessment and review of our current curriculum provision and our approach to it.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will draw a line at that stage, as we are short on time. Danny is next.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Minister. I agree that devolution is the way forward with local Ministers in charge, because it comes down to policy. I know that there have to be priorities and a budget. My question will go down the youth route, and I apologise for being parochial. It is on the back of what I asked about last week, which was the West Belfast detached team, which I mentioned last week. That model that worked for all of West Belfast, but unfortunately, when cuts came, it was one of the programmes that did not get refunded. Since it collapsed, we have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour, or, as I like to say, some of our young people have made the wrong decisions and made the headlines. You will have seen that 'Belfast Live' has run stories about attacks in Falls Park. A young boy was knocked unconscious, and there have been several attacks on the Glider with youths getting on the roof of the buses with water balloons and smashing windows. It might be the minority doing that; however, it is about how we reach out to those young people.

The detached team played a vital role, and it could be called on when there were more serious incidents, such as when things kicked off at Lanark Way a number of years ago. It was the community and voluntary youth workers who got there and de-escalated what was happening on our streets. The loss of that team is really being felt in the community, and there will be a meeting this Friday with all the stakeholders. I know that you talk positively all the time about working as a community with the PSNI and community groups and so on to provide a wrap-around service. This is it. This is the model. I know that budgets are very tight, and I get where the Education Authority wants to go with the detached work, educational outcomes and targeted intervention work. That model can work as well; they can go hand in hand. Can there be a review of that programme? Could work be done with the chief executive of the Education Authority to reinstate the programme, even as a pilot or one-year programme, in order to measure the outcomes? The work and the evidence base from the last programme are there for all to see.

Mr Givan: Obviously, I still have not responded to you in detail on that, and I will. If we look into it, we see that funding is still available for youth work in West Belfast. The issue has been about the move towards accessing youth centres through the regional assessment and the approach that has been taken. We are reviewing that policy to see how it works with the youth sector, and a number of meetings are taking place. We are reviewing the policy and the approach, but it has led to the issue that you raised about West Belfast and accessing youth centres. I get what you are saying about people being out there when issues arise on the ground and not in a youth centre. The detached youth worker can do that in a way that they maybe cannot if they are based in youth centres. Linsey, do you want to pick up on that point?

Mrs Farrell: I met the group some time ago, and I am conscious that there is an invitation to the meeting on Friday. We have looked into this, and, as the Minister said, the Department will be coming back in greater detail in response to the issue that you raised. The EA has confirmed that funding for detached youth work is still available in West Belfast, but that is through local area-based funding opportunities. I know that the specific issue is the coordinator of local detached youth work in West Belfast, and the local statutory youth worker is now taking that coordination forward. That will be

looked at. Detached youth has been raised across a number of areas, so it is being picked up in the review that the Minister referred to on both the policy and the funding delivery model.

Mr Baker: Some of the specification that is out there is not necessarily detached work. It is about intervention, bringing them into the centre and working with small groups. I believe that there is a model for that, but there is room for both.

I appreciate the answer, and I have to say that, with all the questions that I asked the Minister about youth work, the community and voluntary sector has been really happy with the answers. They know that you are listening and that you get it. I am not just saying that; those are their words, not mine.

Mr Givan: I appreciate that.

Mr Baker: There is just one other wee area that I would like to touch on.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Will you be quick, yes?

Mr Baker: I will just go back to your answer to David. I have a quick question of clarification about sixth form. You said that not all schools need a sixth form. I had you out to St Colm's High School. Again, I am being parochial; I am really sorry. I thank you for the visit, but one of the reasons why it is held back — again, I put it in the top 10 — is about numbers, even though the numbers went up. I understand that sixth form numbers were impacting the school as well. Is that the case? If they did not have a sixth form, would that impact on its numbers for a new school?

Dr Kingon: That was for the capital protocol for selection by numbers. If you are a school for 11- to 16-year-olds, the assessment of capital going through the gateway is made on the basis of your year 8 to 12 enrolment. It would not be a consideration that you do not have sixth form at that point. Obviously, if you have a small sixth form, that is a consideration, but we look at schools in their own right, so a school for 11- to 16-year-olds is, of course, able to apply for and receive capital. With the prioritisation of the new builds at the last call, my understanding is that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) did not put St Colm's forward at that stage. The school did not make its priority list. Obviously, we are trying to get equity and balance across all the sectors, so a limited number of schools from each sector can be nominated. I do not think that it is an issue to do with the size of the sixth form at all or not having a sixth form. We look at the sustainability at years 8 to 12 and then at the sustainability at post 16 separately.

Mr Baker: Thank you for the clarity.

Mr Sheehan: All politics are local, Danny.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you all for your answers so far. I welcome the announcement of the raise achievement to reduce educational disadvantage (RAISE) programme, first and foremost. That is a significant investment, and I am delighted to see that Carrickfergus will be one of the areas that will benefit from it, as it addresses social and economic deprivation.

In that vein, I want to ask about educational best practice. When the Department sees a method of good practice, how does it communicate that to schools? How is it implemented and then delivered on the ground?

I will squeeze in my other two questions just to make sure that I get it all in before the end of the session.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It had better be fast.

Ms Brownlee: School absenteeism is a huge issue. We know that the Department treats it as a priority. Can you detail what actions the Department is taking to address it? How is the impact measured?

My third question is on the exceptional circumstances policy. I know that that is done through the Education Authority, but has the Department recognised it as an area that could be improved?

Mr Givan: Obviously, absenteeism is an area, post COVID, that has been a real challenge in every school. Some schools have really good practice, and with politics being local, Knockmore Primary School in Lisburn has had really good results through its Attendance HERO scheme, as it calls it — here, every day, ready and on time. The EA has been working with the school on that. Its attendance figures have gone from 89% to 92% — that is a 3% increase — over the past two years, which is significant. Knockmore is an example of this, so where a school really drives an approach to addressing absenteeism through various rewards, competition between classes and year groups, prizes, assemblies, charts and recognition, it is an example of a school that has really grasped the issue and is dealing with it well.

We are going to look at how we can accommodate addressing absenteeism in that RAISE whole-school community approach. That is designed to link in way beyond the school gates, so it will link in with communities and organisations. That will be an element of it, but we want to give flexibility to the RAISE scheme. We will have what I think will be called area partnerships or boards. There will be 15 of those, with a coordinator in each, and they will design the programme and ask, "What areas do we want to prioritise?". There will be a fair degree of flexibility in how the schemes operate.

You asked about the exceptional circumstances body (ECB).

Ms Brownlee: Yes. I have received a few reports that are basically about how the process for considering exceptional circumstances for school places can be professionalised and standardised. The Committee's previous briefing was from the independent review of education panel, and it recognises that we can definitely do something to improve the process for and communication to people who apply for exceptional circumstances and that that process could be professionalised to some degree.

Mrs Farrell: We can take that away, look at it and come back to you about it so that we can understand the details of where that is the case. We can take that away.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you.

Mr Givan: We want to share best practice more. That gets back to the point about the inspectorate always being very good at identifying and revealing things that are happening in some schools that other schools may not be aware of. Schools can be very innovative, and that can be identified through the inspection process. We can then take that information and share it. That is why it is important for the inspection scheme to be stood back up.

Ms Brownlee: There have been so many areas — I have seen some of this in Carrickfergus in East Antrim — that are doing phenomenal work in little pods. It is about how you can nurture that and expand it throughout the area, so it is good to see that that is being recognised. Hopefully, that will be progressed throughout Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We are down a few members.

Mr Givan: I see that it is the case that, "All politics are local" applies to some more than others. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Absolutely.

Mr Givan: Where did Robbie go?

Ms Nicholl: *[Inaudible]* any schools in South Belfast.

Mr Givan: Well done, Kate, you are still here. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you all for your time. I want to raise one final point. You said that you are waiting for the June monitoring round process to roll around before final Budget allocations are made. Can you give the Committee assurances about how early it will be given a full budget briefing? The Committee felt that it did not get quite enough information in advance of the current Budget; a lot of us went into the Budget debate without a lot of information, even about what had gone before. Can you give us a sense of whether the Department can undertake to give the Committee a detailed Budget briefing between now and the summer recess?

Mr Givan: Yes, we know what our budget is, and we are putting bids into the June monitoring round, so I am happy to say that we will engage with the Committee and provide it with information on what we are bidding for and the kind of needs that we have. In broad terms, I have outlined the quantum of the potential overspend that we face. I may be able to provide more information in advance of formally seeking that through June monitoring. I have already sought that through the formal processes to allow the Finance Department to consider all departmental bids.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It would be helpful for the Committee if we could get sight of that as early as possible. We understand the significance of budget to all this and how challenging the picture is.

There was plenty there that we will pick up with you in the months ahead. We thank you for your time this afternoon. We appreciate it.

Mr Givan: Not at all. Thank you.