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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 January 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the House spent some hours debating the COVID situation, and there was cross-party exhortation to the public to obey each and every public health regulation. Yesterday also, we had another republican funeral at which those regulations were flagrantly breached, yet we have a party of government in the House that today is refusing to say whether any of its public representatives were present and, indeed, is refusing to condemn the situation. How can the House hope to command public support and confidence in our regulations if a party of government continues in that equivocal attitude in respect of such a matter?

Mr Speaker: You will understand that that is not a point of order, Mr Allister. Your point is made and is on the record.

Committee Business

Standing Order 110

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 110(1) and insert:-

"(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31st March 2020 – 3rd July 2021."

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other contributors will have five minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring this motion to the House today. It proposes amending Standing Order 110, which relates to the temporary provisions of Standing Orders 110 to 116.

Standing Orders 110 to 116 were agreed by the Assembly on 27 March 2020. The temporary provisions allow Assembly business and Committee operations to continue whilst adhering to public health advice and keeping Members and staff here as safe as possible. They include provisions for a reduction in the number of Members who are required in the Chamber in the light of the current circumstances and the need to socially distance.

They also make provision for voting by proxy and, in particular, for the number of proxy votes carried by a Member to be taken into account in the collection of voices that precedes a Division. Furthermore, importantly for Committee operations, the temporary provisions provide for enhanced remote working practices. They also provide for

Committee members to delegate their vote to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson. Most importantly, they provide for Statutory Committees to make decisions without meeting. Similar provisions are in place for Standing Committees, with particular provision made for the Audit Committee and to maintain, so far as is possible, the existing structures of the Business Committee.

When these temporary provisions were initially agreed, a time frame of 30 September 2020 was set, with the provisions ceasing to have effect following that date. However, at its meeting on 17 September 2020, given the prevalence of COVID-19 in our communities and, indeed, across the globe, the Committee agreed to further extend the temporary provisions to 31 January 2021. The motion to extend the temporary provisions was subsequently agreed by the Assembly on 29 September 2020. At that stage, we all hoped that the worst of the pandemic might now be behind us. Unfortunately, that could not be further from the current situation with COVID-19. Therefore, at its meeting on 16 December 2020, the Committee agreed to further extend the temporary provisions. The Committee was cognisant of the increasing and alarming rate with which the disease is spreading, and that more and more people are getting ill and requiring hospital treatment. Rather than extend the provisions to Easter recess, the Committee agreed a motion to extend them right up to the summer recess on 3 July 2021. I hope that the Committee has been overly generous with this extension period but, given where we are today with the pandemic, it is very possible that social distancing and remote working will be required beyond the Easter recess period.

I will briefly update the House on a couple of issues that the Committee is considering in relation to proxy voting and remote working. First, as part of its ongoing review of the temporary provisions, the Committee has received some concern about the 9.30 am deadline for a Member to nominate a proxy. The Committee will receive legal advice on this at its next meeting, with the intention of bringing a motion to the House at a later date. Secondly, the Committee is continuing to consider the instances in which proxy voting could be retained on a more permanent basis and how that might be reflected in Standing Orders, relating in particular to Members who may not be able to attend Parliament Buildings because of parental leave or long-term sick absence.

Finally, I am pleased to notify the House that, at its meeting on 20 January 2021, the Committee

agreed to proceed to introduce hybrid proceedings in the Chamber. A Committee motion to amend Standing Orders was agreed, and I hope this will be brought to the House in the near future for a cross-community vote.

Today's Committee motion and the ongoing work on proxy voting and hybrid proceedings are a reminder that we, as an Assembly, need to do our bit to keep ourselves, our colleagues and our families as safe as we possibly can. I welcome the recent update to all Members from the Cheann Comhairle — the Speaker — on managing Assembly business during COVID-19 and how:

"Supporting the public health message and considering the welfare of all Members and staff should be our priorities at this time."

Therefore, on behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: No Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I call Tom Buchanan to conclude the debate.

Mr T Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I welcome the opportunity to conclude today's debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders. As outlined, this comes to the House today as the current temporary provisions will cease to have effect on 31 January. The provisions were originally agreed by the Assembly on 27 March to keep its business operating and everyone safe during the pandemic. I acknowledge that, on 29 September last year, we, again, asked the Assembly to extend the temporary provisions for a period of four months. Of course, at that time, I am sure that most of us thought that, by the end of January this year, we would be well on the path out of the COVID pandemic. Sadly, that is not the case. Since Christmas, we have seen a considerable rise in the number of positive cases of COVID, our hospitals are inundated, and the medical staff are exhausted. We certainly are in unprecedented times.

Throughout this challenging period, the Committee has continued to carry out its role to keep Standing Orders under review. Therefore, the Committee brought the motion to the House so that Assembly and Committee business can continue to function while adhering to the current regulations and guidelines. The motion amends Standing Order 110 to allow the provisions in Standing Orders 110 to 116 to be temporarily extended to 3 July 2021. Like the

Chairperson, I hope that the Committee is being overly generous with the extension. However, I can assure you that the Committee will keep the situation under constant review and consider further extensions if required.

In conclusion, I welcome the additional issues that the Committee is considering on proxy voting and remote working. Hopefully, those proposals will be brought to the House in the near future. The proposals will give additional provision to help people to stay safe and protect one another in the days that lie ahead. There is an onus on everyone in the House, and every elected representative, to ensure that, as we bring forward and discuss regulations, each of us gives leadership and adheres to the regulations. If the regulations are breached, we should condemn it, as should all elected representatives. We should give leadership directly from the House because that is the only way that we can build confidence in our community. Our community will adhere to the regulations when they follow the people who should be setting an example for them.

Therefore, I thank the Committee for its work on the Standing Orders and commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 110(1) and insert:-

"(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31st March 2020 – 3rd July 2021."

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

10.45 am

Adverse Impact of the Pandemic on Access to Special Educational Needs Support for Vulnerable Children

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): It is a privilege for me to propose the motion on behalf —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I ask you to formally move the motion, please.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the numerous stakeholder reports relating to the adverse impact of the pandemic on access to special educational needs (SEN) support for vulnerable children; calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward appropriate measures in order to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to special educational needs support for all vulnerable children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Executive to provide the associated resources required to cover these services for all future pandemic-related disruptions to education.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

I now invite you to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. As I said, it is a privilege for me to move the motion on behalf of the Education Committee and on behalf of children, young people and families living with special educational needs across Northern Ireland. I begin by moving the motion in my capacity as Chairperson of the Education Committee.

I think that, when lockdown began in March 2020, we appreciated that schools would be challenged by the need to provide educational and related support to children of key workers and to vulnerable children. That latter group — vulnerable children — includes among others those with special educational needs statements, those attending education other than at school (EOTAS) or nurture settings and those potentially subject to domestic violence. We observed that the impact of COVID on SEN provision, particularly in our special schools, was particularly disruptive. The motion calls on the Education Minister to work with the Executive to ensure that adequate contingency support is always in place for any further lockdown and disruption situations.

During lockdown, around 1,500 children of key workers attended around 500 schools, with, perhaps, around 100 vulnerable children joining them. A larger group of vulnerable children — several thousand — also received support

through other departmental or Education Authority (EA) provisions, including the Education Welfare Service (EWS), primary and post-primary behavioural support teams, the counselling service and the Start programme. Working with Health, the Department of Education sought to establish multidisciplinary teams to review challenging vulnerable children cases. Additionally, that team reviewed risk assessments associated with the reopening of special schools. The Department indicated that children were not always able to access special schools during lockdown, where social distancing, sensory challenges and behaviour presented a challenge in terms of health guidance and current staffing levels. That resulted in limited access to special schools for some of our most vulnerable children.

From the outset of the lockdown, members of the Education Committee were profoundly concerned about access to support services for vulnerable children, particularly children with special educational needs. The Committee received concerning evidence from a considerable number of well-informed stakeholder organisations and, indeed, parents of children with special educational needs. Members are aware of the numerous reports and feedback from the stakeholder event that the Education Committee held in December. Access to those are available on our web page. Stakeholders from a wide range of organisations and parents told us in no uncertain terms about considerable disruption to the special educational needs support provided by schools for vulnerable children during lockdown. Schools often told us that they felt abandoned by the Department and the Education Authority during that period and were left with great challenges in supporting the vulnerable children whom they so dedicatedly support in normal circumstances. Parents indicated that the disruption not only disadvantaged the children but impacted greatly and adversely on the lives of the parents and families, particularly in the cases of children and young people with autism. Stakeholders indicated that the continued disruption caused real problems, despite the Restart process and during the extended Halloween break.

In response, the Committee called for Education and Health to establish multidisciplinary, cross-departmental, coherent and permanent processes for ensuring that vulnerable children gained consistent access to the SEN support that they needed and deserved during and after the pandemic. The Committee felt strongly that that should be a transparent single-point-of-entry process with a named officer responsible for each child. The

Committee agreed to call on the Department of Education to urgently bring forward a temporary continuity direction in order to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to SEN support for all vulnerable children and to provide the associated resources required to cover those services for all future pandemic-related disruptions to education. It is noted that a direction was brought forward earlier in January, but outstanding issues remain. I am sure that colleagues will bring those forward today.

The Committee also suggested that the Education Authority do more to ensure that schools are provided with the resources that they need to allow them to provide flexible SEN support, including outside of usual school opening hours. It is noted that cross-departmental working and Executive support will be needed in order to make all of that happen. That is why we tabled today's motion.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister of Education for agreeing to respond to the debate. It is my understanding that he has been delayed by urgent Executive business, and we acknowledge that. It is hoped that he will be able to respond to the motion in due course.

I speak now in my capacity as an Alliance MLA. It is profoundly clear that children with special educational needs and their families felt abandoned during the first lockdown and struggled to have their voices heard and that it took too long for those voices to be heard. I am grateful for the evidence that they gave to the Education Committee to make sure that those concerns were heard loudly and clearly by the Assembly and the Department of Education. The Minister of Education has prioritised the reopening of special schools during this lockdown, but, in that regard, there are concerns for the safety of the pupils and staff at those schools. We need much more clarity from the Education Minister on the contingency support services that are in place for children who are unable to attend school at this time and on the protection and safety measures that are being put in place to support pupils and staff in the special schools that remain open. In particular, we need clarity regarding progress on the prioritisation of vaccination.

We look forward to hearing from the Education Minister today on those key issues. I also look forward to hearing my colleagues speak on this important matter, which has been a priority for the Education Committee throughout our tenure.

Mr Humphrey: I support the motion. These are issues that the Education Committee has spent a huge amount of time discussing over the past number of months. There is an agreed voice in the Committee on issues across special educational needs, and there has been collaboration on members' concerns.

At the outset, on behalf of my party, I give due credit to principals, teachers, classroom assistants, support staff and governors in all our schools.

As I continually say, they all have to make difficult decisions on a daily basis for the good and welfare of not just staff and schools but, in particular, of our young people. That is hugely important as the pandemic reaches new heights through the various new strains.

Some 80,000 children in Northern Ireland are deemed to have special needs in some form, and more than 18,000 of them are statemented. That situation is worsening, and I declare an interest as a governor in two schools, Edenbrooke Primary School and the Belfast Model School for Girls.

All of us in our constituency offices have to deal with those issues, which are so hugely important and emotionally difficult for the children who are affected, their parents, the other children in the classroom and the teachers. Those issues are hugely difficult. There is, of course, an ongoing inquiry into those issues that is being led by the Public Accounts Committee, which I am privileged to Chair and on which you sit, Mr Deputy Speaker.

During the initial lockdown, special needs schools were closed and many respite and support services were suspended. That had an adverse effect on young people and their families. Those services are vital to those special young people and their families. Pupils attending special schools are amongst our most vulnerable children, and removing school and the regularity of the classroom from their daily life is devastating for them and their parents. The decision to allow special schools to remain open reflected that, and I commend the Minister for that decision.

Before Christmas, I met the principal of a primary school in my constituency. She advised me that almost 50% of the children in her school are deemed to have special needs. That is not a special needs school but a primary school in my constituency. We need to remember that the young people in those schools, the staff who work with them and their

families are also hugely affected by the situation.

We have all received a mixed mailbag about those issues from parents and from teachers who work in special schools. My party and I have full and absolute sympathy for the teachers and staff working in special needs schools. COVID regulations cannot be adhered to in classrooms. The rule on 2 metres cannot be practicably enforced in schools, and that is the case in special schools in particular. We all appreciate that. Colleagues and I met the special needs teachers' group, and Mr Newton and I had a meeting with the principal and some governors of Fleming Fulton School a number of months ago to discuss those issues.

Some parents and sectoral voices have said that the multidisciplinary support panel arrangements that were established during lockdown appear to have been effective and that that experience should be utilised in schools once the pandemic ends. That is something that we should bear in mind for when we get to the end of this dreadful time.

The requirements of SEN in schools mean that it is difficult for teachers and staff to socially distance from pupils or to wear PPE. In many cases, it involves personal care that goes beyond regular teaching responsibilities. Again, that is something that the Committee has huge sympathy for.

Some special needs schools have decided to balance classroom and remote learning due to the rise in community transmission. However, blended learning highlights differences in social and economic backgrounds, and some pupils may have been cut off due to a lack of access to technology. Indeed, last week, I was contacted by the principal of a school in my constituency who required more tablets for children.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Humphrey: Those are hugely sensitive and important issues. We need to work together and support the Minister. There needs to be improved communication and information from the Department and from the EA.

Ms Brogan: The pandemic has created huge challenges for so many people, but today we are focusing on the particular difficulties that it has visited upon children with special educational needs. I am sure that the inboxes of many MLAs contain heartbreaking accounts

of the devastating impact that the loss of SEN support has had on many children and their families. Any disruption to routine is difficult for all children, but nothing compares to the impact that disruption has for children with special educational needs, such as children with autism.

In the first response to COVID-19 and the struggle to save lives, mainstream and special schools were closed. Afterwards, we learnt of the impact of that decision on some children and their families.

In evidence to the Education Committee, the National Autistic Society and the Evangelical Alliance described an increasing cry for help, which was often met with a resounding silence. Children were left waiting for statements, annual reviews and tribunal hearings, and families reported difficulties in contacting the Education Authority to find out what was going on. Children lost not only their routine but access to vital therapeutic services, such as language development, which are usually provided by a health trust but are delivered on-site at school. Families were left without help, often without explanation and respite. Many children became confused and angry, regressing into silence or lashing out with violence. A few families were faced with impossible choices such as involving the police to safeguard their child from self-harming or harming others.

11.00 am

In the wake of all that, when the spread of the virus led to increased restrictions and school settings moved to remote learning, the Minister of Education decided that special schools should, this time, remain open, but that was a decision without a proper plan. Without support, extra PPE and additional staff, the Minister's decision has unnecessarily pitched parents and children against teachers and carers, who are rightly concerned about their safety as well as that of the children whom they support. Staff who are providing personal care to children with special needs should be considered for early vaccination in line with those providing social care in other settings.

It is right that we formally recognise the adverse impact of the pandemic on children in need of SEN support, but it is not enough. Minister Weir should bring forward appropriate measures to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to SEN support for our most vulnerable children and provide the resources necessary to maintain support, regardless of future

pandemic-related disruption to education. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr McCrossan: As the SDLP education spokesperson, I welcome today's debate, and I support this important motion. I pay tribute to the incredible staff who are working tirelessly in the most challenging environments in special schools across the north of this island. They are supporting some of our most vulnerable people, and their dedication and complete sacrifice must be commended today in the Chamber. I speak also as the uncle of a child with severe complex needs. My sister's son, aged five, is non-verbal and attends a special educational needs school, Knockavoe. That school has been critical to his development at such a young age. The work that the staff do in the school to support him and my family — my sister, in particular — has been very much appreciated, and it has been of huge benefit to the child.

It is incredible that, almost 11 months into the pandemic, principals and teachers in special schools, and even parents, are still crying out for guidance, for support and for the appropriate measures to be put in place so that they can best protect their pupils. We need a complete sea change in approach from the Minister, who cannot afford to be a johnny-come-lately on the issue, which is one of the most serious in his brief. It is entirely unacceptable that there has been a severe lack of appropriate expert-led guidance and support provided to principals and staff at special schools. Teachers, classroom assistants and other staff are attending work with inadequate guidance on how to protect themselves and their pupils from the virus.

It is not the case that the Minister is unaware of those concerns; they are very well made. Principals and teachers in special needs schools have highlighted their concerns privately to the Minister and, as a last resort, publicly in various media outlets, as a cry for immediate intervention. Indeed, the Committee for Education, as the Chair said, has spent months outlining the concerns. Indeed, the SDLP has continually urged the Minister to convene immediately a new working group, comprising special school principals and public health experts, who would be tasked with providing additional and improved safety measures for special needs schools. Rather than taking on that very valid and important proposal, the Minister claimed that meetings with his Department's officials and special schools are taking place and that public health officials can be invited, if they want to attend. Given the importance of the issue and the fact

that those schools have been expected simply to remain open without proper support, the Minister's position is absolutely reprehensible and unforgivable. The Minister must realise that special schools cannot operate or function in the same way in which mainstream schools can. They require staff to go above and beyond in order that pupils' educational and sensory needs are met. Their staff cannot wear PPE or socially distance and are being put in a very precarious position, yet they are expected to deal with it all without the support that they have demanded.

All teachers and school staff, especially those in special schools, need to be prioritised during the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines. Although there are many things that the Minister and I have disagreed on in the Chamber, we share the concern of the need to prioritise school staff, particularly special school staff. Our special school staff should be vaccinated first, followed by a robust vaccination programme being rolled out across the board to all education staff.

The Minister should be using this time during the current restrictions to plan properly rather than waiting until all schools return, which will cause them unnecessary disruption. In that regard, I would be grateful if the Minister would divulge the latest updates on his request for the vaccination roll-out across the education sector. There have been outbreaks of COVID-19 in special schools across the North. Data from the Public Health Agency (PHA) shows clearly that 70% of those infections relate to staff. That statistic only compounds the realisation that, so far, guidance and support have been completely and utterly inadequate.

I stress again that it is vital that we have expert-led and context-appropriate processes in place to protect both staff and pupils in special schools. If proper safety measures are not put in place, many special schools will encounter significant staffing shortages that will fully compromise their ability to look after the educational needs of some of the most vulnerable in our society. Indeed, that is already starting to happen. A number of special schools have had to reduce their provision without appropriate intervention. That is a regrettable trend that can only grow. The Minister must act today to resolve the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McCrossan: This is a matter of urgency. The Minister is aware of it. He needs to step in

now to ensure that adequate resources and protections are put in place to protect our staff and our pupils in those schools.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for joining us for what is a really important debate. I thank members of the Education Committee for agreeing to table the motion. It is one of the issues on which we on the Education Committee have been collegiate. There is real desire and heart among members to see those children who have a special educational need or a statement to be not just treated fairly but supported and resourced in whatever way they can. COVID has thrown quite a substantial obstacle in the way of that provision. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken to address it has been huge, particularly for children with a special educational need and their families. I am sure that, like me, many Members are deluged with emails from parents, teachers and bus drivers who are involved in supporting those children. They are asking us to step up and ensure that protection is there for them and that they are protected.

The temporary modification that the Minister brought into the provisions listed in Part II of the Education Order 1996 and in the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations 2005 removes the Education Authority's legal duty to ensure that children with the most complex needs receive the provisions set out in the statement. That has been said to have had the greatest impact on children with the highest level of need, who perhaps need that additional support the most. It goes against everything that we know and feel to be right as to how we support those children. COVID has not been fair to any of us, however, and it has not been fair to those children either. I know that the Minister will indicate that it is a temporary move, but we all know that the reality is that the effects on those children will be longer-lasting than that temporary effect.

A recent report by the National Autistic Society (NAS) shows that 68% of family members say that their autistic child is anxious about the loss of their routine. It also shows that 65% could not do online work and that it has fallen to parents to homeschool in order to support their children's education, often whilst juggling work and other commitments. The report goes on to state that two in five parents and carers do not feel that they can adequately support their child with their educational needs. Seven in 10 parents say that their child has difficulty understanding or completing schoolwork, and around half say that their child's progress is suffering. Collectively, we and parents would

like to thank the teachers, support staff, drivers and all those involved in keeping our special schools open for the sterling effort that they are making in the face of one of the greatest crises that we have ever seen.

As I outlined at the start, the Education Committee has been collegiate on those issues, which is not easy, given that there is a five-party Executive that always find room to disagree on just about anything. We have heard from stakeholders, ranging from principals and teachers to parents and pupil advocates, who speak with an almost unilateral voice in saying that closing special schools would be more detrimental to children's physical, emotional, mental and societal health. It is absolutely imperative that every single mitigation and safety measure that can be implemented is implemented with haste.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member agree with me that it is totally incredible that special schools have yet to receive a single penny from the Engage programme when all other schools have received it? Surely that is a shocking situation that should be addressed by the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Butler: Yes, I agree, and I hope that the Minister will update us on that. There might have been a suggestion last week that there was £7 million of funding, but I agree that that money could and should have been made available.

There is an absolute need today, in real time, to monitor, liaise daily with stakeholders, and then review and improve everything that we do around COVID, especially where we seek to keep special schools open. That conversation needs to include the voices of teachers, bus drivers, classroom assistants and the healthcare staff who are involved in supporting those pupils. I offer the Minister a solution today and suggest that we have a stand-alone, visible and accessible special schools champion who would operate from now through the remainder of this pandemic and post-COVID, because the reality is that the recovery phase for those pupils will be harder than for pupils in mainstream schools. Their difficulties are already compounded.

We often talk about mental health, and I am going to talk about it again. The mental health issues for children with a special educational need or a learning disability are often hidden,

compounded and not talked about because they are not seen. The reality is that, through these lockdowns and restrictions, when children come out of their routine, those issues can be magnified greatly. I will end by saying that I support the motion and make the offer to the Minister of a suggestion that might bring some resolution and comfort to those who need it.

Mr Newton: Like my colleague William Humphrey, I pay tribute to all those who are involved in the education of our children at all levels. In my constituency, the principals, teachers and support staff are making fantastic efforts in these very difficult days. The Assembly and Executive have agreed and recognised the importance of education and, indeed, made it a priority. I have to say that there is much that Mr Lyttle and I disagree on, particularly around his opposition to the transfer test and to grammar schools, but on this I do agree with him. It is a privilege to speak up for the children who have special needs.

COVID challenges are thrown at us almost on a daily basis, and the requirements in SEN schools mean that it is difficult for teachers and other staff to socially distance from the pupils and to wear PPE. In many cases, that involves personal care of the pupil by the teacher above what would be regarded as a special or regular teaching responsibility. Therefore, concerns have been raised about the need to protect the pupils and teachers by giving special school staff priority access to the vaccine after the first phase. Some also argue for the need for enhanced staff testing.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member agree with me that it is important that the Education Minister is in support of the Health Minister? There was unanimous agreement at the Education Committee last week that a letter should go to the Health Minister asking him to contact the Health Secretary on the mainland about all the Health Ministers calling for the early vaccination of teachers, particularly those in special schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Newton: I agree with the Member; he and I led the debate in the Committee on that matter.

The DUP has highlighted the need for additional resources more generally to ensure that the education budget is fit for purpose for SEN pupils. Minister Weir has previously told the Education Committee that there has been a

rapid rise in budgetary pressures to provide support for pupils with special needs in recent years. More generally, he indicated, prior to the pandemic, that in the region of £400 million extra was needed for education. The 1.8% rise proposed by the Finance Minister in his draft Budget does not come anywhere near delivering what is required. For that reason and in the context of the motion, I and my DUP colleagues recognised at the Committee the need to include a few extra words. Thankfully, those were eventually taken on board. Those words were the phrase:

"calls on the Minister to work with the Executive to provide ... associated resources" —

that is budgets — to address all the current needs of our pupils. It is over to Ministers to react positively to the motion. If we are to see successful implementation, Ministers Murphy, Mallon and Long all have to take it on board.

11.15 am

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I have already given way on one occasion.

Each of those Ministers is key to the successful outcome of what is called for in the motion.

As Mr Humphrey said, since the Assembly was restored, the Education Committee has supported special educational needs schools. Members of the Committee have met the principals' leadership group and have sought to understand the problems and to provide support. Success for pupils and schools has been central to my thinking and that of my party colleagues. We acknowledge the need for a partnership ethos between schools, parents and the Education Authority and for actions that are designed to meet the needs of the children. DUP Members want a school environment that is safe, and regular professional communication between all those involved to allow interactions between staff and pupils will make it safe. Those staff include school staff, therapists and staff from the Education Authority, the Department of Education, and health bodies.

The message that should go out from the debate is that the Minister has been committed to improving the current system of special educational provision to help pupils with SEN to achieve their full potential. The DUP is determined to enhance the system of special educational provision in order to ensure that it is

accessible, effective and accountable, whilst meeting the needs of children and parents in a more straightforward and responsive way. We have made some progress, and work in ongoing to progress the new SEN regulations and codes of practice, which will deliver on many of the recommendations set out by independent bodies and which specifically target better time frames for assessments. We want to see that expedited in the coming weeks and months. Funding has also been granted to schools to deliver new SEN frameworks.

The pandemic —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Newton: — has had a disproportionate adverse impact on children with special needs and disabilities.

Ms Flynn: I start by joining with other Members in commending all the work that has been done by so many organisations that have supported children and their families over the difficult past months. That includes one of the groups in my constituency, Kids Together, as well as the Children's Law Centre, the Evangelical Alliance, and the National Autistic Society, which has been mentioned previously.

As we all know, routine, stability and support are so important in the lives of children with complex needs. The absence of those things, which might seem simple to us, can cause major emotional and behavioural difficulties, with consequences for families and home environments. Unfortunately, as we know, that absence has been the experience of so many families throughout the pandemic,

It is deeply upsetting that, in addition to school closures, vital health and social care wraparound services were also withdrawn, leaving children with special educational needs and their families feeling isolated and abandoned. We need to know that that lack of support will not happen again and that those families will not be left on their own. We also need to understand what planning and consultation have taken place. Can the Department of Education and, indeed, the Department of Health, provide reassurances that those families will be supported no matter what comes down the line in the months ahead?

Evidence is emerging that parents of children with special educational needs and the children themselves appear to be experiencing worry

and changes in mood and behaviour because of the rapid social changes that have occurred over the past 10 months. COVID-19 is clearly affecting the mental health of parents and children. Some parents reported feeling overwhelmed, so the implications of how to support those families in the immediate future must be discussed. That is why I welcome today's debate and motion.

There is good reason to believe that the pandemic and our response to it may be affecting children with special educational needs and their families disproportionately, and, unfortunately, that is likely to have negative outcomes for their mental health. We know that some mental health problems are already associated with special educational needs in normal circumstances, such as anxiety in the autism spectrum, and it seems likely that the scale and speed of the social change that has taken place since the end of March could exacerbate existing mental health problems and, indeed, trigger new ones for some of those children.

Staying at home and, in many cases, as we have seen, not attending school or not getting the same levels of support that families and kids received in the past has created a uniquely stressful situation for those children and their families. Their carefully developed routines have been disrupted, their support networks have disintegrated and parents have been asked to do a job that trained teachers find challenging. The parents are doing that without any training. These changes have happened really abruptly, and the consequences will be particularly profound in the special educational needs community. Therefore, it is important to ask how COVID-19 is affecting the mental health of these families, with a view to gaining insight into how we, as a society, with the Department of Health and the Department of Education — all of us — can support them over the coming months.

Reports are showing that children with special educational needs and their families are likely to be at greater risk, unfortunately and sadly, of experiencing poor mental health and being under substantially greater pressure than less-vulnerable families during COVID-19. However, it is important to note that although some families will not need or want that additional support, we must find a way to identify those who are struggling and want additional support and then find a way of providing support tailored to them, should that be from an educational perspective or, indeed, a health and social care perspective over the coming weeks and months.

I am happy to support the motion, and I thank the Members for bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for coming to answer the questions raised during the debate, and I also thank the Chair for bringing the motion to the House. I assure him of our support.

During the initial lockdown in March 2020, special schools closed and many respite and support services, such as trauma response, were suspended. Vulnerable children, some with complex needs and disability, had no support, and there was no support for their parents during the first lockdown either. Lack of services and support led to many issues, and many parents experienced setbacks in special education, affecting not only their children's education but their mental health. Lack of routine affected many vulnerable children in many different ways, including loss of appetite, mood changes and lethargy. My colleague mentioned the difficulties around social distancing and wearing PPE, so I will not repeat that.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for kindly giving way. Does the Member know whether his ministerial colleague has put a bid in for further resourcing or funding for education, and, if that is the case, does he have any details on it? Given that almost £400 million is lying with the Minister of Finance, would it not be good if some of that money were to be directed to support those in education?

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention, but the Minister is here and can speak for himself.

Pupils who attend special schools are among our most vulnerable children, but, for their parents, school was a time of daily respite from what can be a challenging time at home. Therefore, it is important that special educational needs are catered for during the current lockdown. Many children in special educational needs schools require routine, and losing that routine can set children back and, in some cases, cause withdrawal. Not all special education schools can remain open all day. Lessons are prepared after each school day for the following day. Sometimes, lessons are complex, reflecting the needs of children and bearing in mind the safety and well-being of staff. Some special education schools can only remain open until 1.00 pm or 1.30 pm to ensure that proper educational needs-based programmes are in place for the following day.

There must be flexibility within the system. One set of rules does not fit all circumstances. School opening hours are set by boards of governors in conjunction with senior staff, and not all schools will have the same hours or set of circumstances.

Many Members have referred at the Education Committee and in this place to the urgent need to offer protection to teachers and workers in special educational needs settings. I raised in the House just recently the question of vaccination priority for teachers. I implore the Minister and the Executive to place greater priority on offering vaccinations to staff in special educational needs schools, in particular, and all schools, in general. To that end, I ask the Minister, backed by the Education Committee, to apply pressure on the Health Minister to set aside an urgent timetable for the vaccination of teachers and school employees.

Bespoke guidance issued on 21 January was informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice, including the latest public health guidance, and provides guidance on how special schools in Northern Ireland can operate. That is what the Minister is compelled to use to form his judgements in an ongoing COVID environment. The aim is to ensure broad consistency and equity across Northern Ireland, but it is sufficiently flexible to allow special education schools and staff to adopt approaches that best suit their needs and those of their pupils.

I share the concerns of other Committee members, parents and teachers and hope that the motion will help to address some of those concerns. The motion highlights how vital it is that access to special educational needs support for vulnerable children is available and that it is sufficiently funded. We should be working towards that. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in my previous life as a footballer, I never attacked anybody, because I felt that it was a weakness and a flaw in your character. It is better to attack in defence.

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mr McNulty: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. My Committee colleagues and I have been consistently raising this issue with the Minister for some months.

I begin by thanking each and every person involved in schools and education across the North, and I include parents. Their modus operandi has been turned completely upside

down, more so than in probably any other walk of life, yet they have continued to work throughout the pandemic, even though it has changed every way that education has been delivered, to provide educational resources and to try to manage schools. I really want to pay tribute to them and to say a heartfelt "thanks".

Children with additional and/or complex needs are some of the most vulnerable citizens. Whilst education is important to their academic development, equally so is the routine of school, meeting friends and social interaction. As others have said, however, at school, they have access to a range of other allied health care services: educational psychology, speech and language therapies, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and, I say it again, the routine of school, the removal of which has been devastating for some families.

From the outset of the pandemic, parents have been pleading with me, and, I am sure, with many other Members, to ensure that special schools and special units in mainstream schools remained open. Our education system failed that group of children at the early stage of the pandemic. I appreciate that we were faced with something strange and new, but the constant cry from parents has been that they had support from the school but did not have access to the allied health care support that their children so badly needed. The routine that is so important for so many families has been completely disrupted.

I fully support the opening of special schools and provision for children with statements of special educational needs. In doing so, however, I want to ensure that schools are safe, and feel safe, for those children and the teachers, assistants and carers who look after them during the school day. Whilst the figures show that transmission in schools, particularly in primary schools, is low, we are all too aware of the high rates of transmission in the community. Teachers and staff live in local communities and are genuinely afraid of picking up the virus, despite their best endeavours, and bringing it into their school.

They are also anxious about being told to isolate and about not being able to attend their place of work while knowing the detrimental impact that their absence from the classroom has on the children they teach and care for. Children with special and complex needs depend on routine. Any closure or interruption to their education, even for planned holidays, can have a detrimental impact, so unplanned and prolonged interruption to their school life is very difficult for them and their families.

11.30 am

I fully appreciate the need for special schools to remain open. However, the staff need to be protected with appropriate PPE, and they need access to priority vaccination. If we are to live up to our commitments to those vulnerable children we are here to speak of today, we should protect them, their teachers and their carers through a project of priority vaccination for those teachers and staff.

A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable. When the dark cloud has passed, we will look back and ask ourselves: how did we treat the most vulnerable children in our care? I hope that we have learned from the errors of the early part of the pandemic.

I want to see a recharge programme in every school, one that rebuilds and invests in our children, their educational attainment, their emotional and physical health and their very well-being. That has to be the Minister and the House's priority going forward. No child can be left behind or left further behind as result of the pandemic. That recharge and reboot of our education system will help those children to catch up and will support those children and families. I support the motion.

Mrs Barton: I will first pay tribute to the parents, staff and all the supporters in the special needs sector in our education system. Those people have worked very hard with the children and have tried to maintain normality with them. I thank them very much for that.

We are all very aware of the impact of the pandemic on our education system, especially among these young people, with their many complex needs. Those young people must be given the educational support that is so vital to them on a daily basis. Many have suffered dreadfully from the impact of the virus. During the first lockdown, many of those people suffered because of a lack of routine in their day. They enjoyed their journey to school and their education. They missed the education, the social aspect of mixing with other young people and, indeed, the interaction with their teachers and carers. This time, however, many of those children have remained at school but are still suffering. While they are in a routine, they are still suffering the effects in school due to the introduction of COVID safety rules for the children and staff. Often there are fewer in the —.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Barton: Yes.

Mr Newton: The Member is gracious, as always. Does the Member agree that key to mitigating some of the circumstances that she is outlining is effective communication between the Education Authority, the schools, the pupils and their parents and getting that important structure in place?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Barton: Indeed, you are quite correct. Communication among all stakeholders is very important, especially for children with special needs and complex difficulties.

During the first lockdown, many children had normality in their life. However, unfortunately, in this second lockdown, although they have had normality, trying to maintain distance has brought a number of issues. Through lower class numbers, children have had difficulty in mixing and socialising again. Teachers have had to spend a lot of time sanitising equipment so that our children are safe in school. While normality has remained, it has been at a great price to the time of support staff and teachers.

Those vulnerable children must continue to be supported by SEN provision. That provision must be flexible in order to work with schools, parents and pupils, as Mr Newton said. It is important that we all continue to support those young people and the staff in their schools through a mixture of blended learning and, much more importantly, teacher-led learning and support. Special educational needs provision for those vulnerable children must continue to be well planned, with consideration for the health of staff and pupils and with the school being a safe environment for all to work in and attend. I support the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I wish to add some comments, predominantly from a health perspective, because there is a considerable crossover.

The first issue that I wish to emphasise, to which other Members referred, is that, although the motion is specifically about the impact of the pandemic on children with special educational needs and their parents, the difficulties are by no means confined to those that have arisen from the pandemic. Indeed, many parents will state clearly that the main impact of the pandemic has been to exacerbate problems that already existed. As the ongoing underfunding of provision continues, we can see the extent to which it is difficult even to

establish how much we spend on special educational needs provision right through to increasing bureaucracy.

Although parents point to a lack of funding in those areas, that is not their main issue. The issue of children who may have special educational needs has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with many parents feeling that their child's evident needs are not being met because those needs have not been officially assessed or practically recognised. There is a specific question about statemented children not having access to a social worker or being considered or provided for. What I have been told over and over again, and what is evident from the reports that are mentioned in the motion, is that there is a sense that Education Authority officials do not pay significant enough attention to the professional viewpoints that are set out by schools, teachers and principals, or even of the expertise that is available in the third sector.

In health, we talk about moving to patient-centred care. With special educational needs, we need to move on the same basis to pupil-centred provision, yet there is an evident risk of children not being recognised as requiring special educational needs provision. Over the five months from May 2020, twice as many children were statemented each month as in the equivalent month in 2019. It is for others to comment on the educational aspects of that, but it surely demonstrates that there is also a need for early years intervention that was not met pre pandemic.

From the health angle, what is most concerning about the specific pandemic situation is the effective withdrawal of many services, from trauma support to autism provision. Indeed, a Queen's University report, 'Understanding Life in Lockdown for Autistic Young People', indicates clearly that anxiety and worry are the predominant emotions for many children with autism. Angel Eyes also notes the lack of clarity around the vision support service, which is not a new issue but has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

A service can simply be withdrawn, but, on other occasions, attempts can be made to maintain a service in a way that does not support or suit the child. Notably, many parents mention, as other Members have, that long-lasting relationships with familiar or trusted staff have broken down to the children's detriment. That also ties in with warnings about a mental health pandemic to follow the COVID pandemic, which, the evidence states, may afflict households with children with special

educational needs unless strong and appropriate intervention is planned now. That aspect of the problem is as yet undefined. However, once again, it emphasises the need for a mental health strategy absolutely no later than the timescale that is currently planned for. That strategy should be fully funded, assured by expert input and ready to go.

With specific reference to the pandemic, I remain concerned that the current view is that routine use of PPE is not required and that transport provision may be based on the notion that children can be in more than one bubble. The first of those may, in theory, be sound technically, but it does not strike me as being practicable in any way.

It leads me to believe that special educational needs teachers need to be treated as carers for the purpose of vaccination and prioritised accordingly. The second strikes me as a blatant contravention of the whole purpose of bubbling. The idea is that the virus should not be transferred between bubbles and thus potentially between multiple households exponentially. I therefore call for a significant and urgent rethink in those areas.

In conclusion, it seems to me that we are experiencing a lack of funding and, perhaps more than that, a lack of knowledge of how we manage special educational needs, both in general and during the pandemic. I pay particular tribute to the numerous SEN schools in South Belfast, from the leadership and boards of governors through to the staff and the visiting healthcare professionals. They all do an amazing job, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Ms Bailey: I, too, welcome the debate and thank the Education Committee for tabling the motion, which the Green Party fully supports. I would be surprised if any MLA has not been contacted by schools, staff, parents or our third sector during the 10-month lockdown to highlight the specific problems and impacts for all involved, many of which have been mentioned in the debate.

We really need to remind ourselves that this is not a COVID issue. COVID has exacerbated many of the issues that were already there. Pre-COVID, SEN provision was in crisis. We did not have enough places in our schools, and children were not being given places for the coming year. When we speak to the schools, we hear that they do not have enough resource to deal with all the issues that they have to work with and that there is a deep sense that they

are being failed by the Department and the Minister.

Ms Bradshaw raised many of the pre-existing problems that have led to the SEN schools facing what they are facing and coping with what they are dealing with today. I have spent a lot of time in one school in my constituency, Glenveagh School. I have been up to its prize-givings, had the tour of the school and met the families, the children, the staff and the teachers. It is a hard situation that they face, because we hear that they are expected to take children who, more frequently, are coming in with more complex needs; are living longer than expected owing to medical advances; and are coming in with more equipment and bigger equipment, such as wheelchairs, even though the school and its classrooms do not have the space to facilitate it. Numbers are growing, but provision is not being given to the school to cope with that. The school has a small outside area that it tries to use to allow kids and parents outside access, but it did not have the resource to do any work on it.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that it is an absolute disgrace that an additional new special school has been recommended for establishment for the Belfast area since 2012 yet we still have not had it delivered?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Member for his intervention. Not just I but the whole sector would absolutely agree with that. It has been waiting and been under pressure for long enough.

Something that really struck me during my time at Glenveagh was that the school wanted to turn part of the outside space that they have into a memorial garden, because it is not uncommon for a lot of the children to die while they are at the school. That is hugely traumatic, not just for their family and staff but for their classmates. They could not get that work done. I am so proud of the Green Party volunteers in South Belfast who did that work for them over the summer. Fully following the regulations and social distancing, we were able to do that work voluntarily and at our own cost, but it would be great if the Department were able to do such work and give the provision that is needed. Despite all of that, the staff and the families continue to provide outstanding care. I commend their commitment and the family lives and community that they have built to support

one another. I can assure the House that they have been more than capable of communicating their situation and circumstances to me. Therefore, I imagine that they are exactly the same when dealing with the Minister and the Department, and that is before we even get to lockdown. The parents, staff and teachers have all been left in limbo and despair. The routines that, in some cases, take years to build up have disappeared. The behavioural problems, not just for children in schools but for the adults in their homes and care settings, have escalated. The social circles, more critical to so many SEN children and adults, have dissipated in some cases.

11.45 am

I have listened to bus drivers in the sector who have told me that, in order to try to provide some level of respite for parents within their capacity, they are driving round and round roundabouts and that, on the journey that they drive to take children home, they are going around twice, even if it provides an extra 10 minutes to the parents for respite care. There is absolutely a huge need to acknowledge and respond to the very special circumstances within the sector. I look forward to hearing from the Minister today what that will be. There is an opportunity here to stop failing our children and the SEN sector.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this issue, and I thank my Alliance colleague, the Chair of the Education Committee, for facilitating the debate. I also thank all of those who work in our schools, many of whom are, quite frankly, scared. Nonetheless, they continue to provide care and support for children with special educational needs in exceptionally challenging circumstances. I have a number of special needs schools in the constituency of East Antrim and know well the dedication of the staff to the children in their care. I speak regularly with staff and parents.

The pandemic has had a profound and long-lasting impact on educational provision across the world. In Northern Ireland, the vast majority of children are learning remotely, including many children with special educational needs, and this presents very serious challenges. A Queen's University report last year found that remote learning arrangements were disproportionately difficult for autistic children, especially as regular school supports are withdrawn. I am disappointed that the issues highlighted appear not to have been resolved. Online learning needs to be reviewed to provide

quality learning and support to meet the needs of special needs children.

With regard to providing ongoing support, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists noted varying COVID-19 arrangements for schools and difficulty in communication and cooperation with schools. Our Minister has to be aware that this is a vital part of ensuring the well-being of young people. I encourage the Minister to work with schools to standardise measures to permit occupational therapists to carry out their functions when schools reopen. Furthermore, can the Minister advise what measures have been put in place to ensure that, through the current period of closure, occupational therapists can work with teachers and others to prioritise students and meet their needs?

This pandemic has highlighted a much greater need for communication across many levels of government, including health trusts and the Education Authority, which needs to engage better to provide support to children with special educational needs in general, but especially through this period of serious disruption. I want to know what the Minister's plans are and what he is putting in place to ensure this. With specific —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: [*Pause.*] Sorry, I thought that there was an interruption.

Mr McCrossan: Yes. Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you very much to the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that the situation facing the SEN sector prior to COVID was beyond crisis mode and that what was happening to our children in vulnerable circumstances was criminal? Statementing forms were not being date-stamped, there were cover-ups in the Education Authority and vulnerable children were left in a very serious situation. That has now worsened. Does the Member believe that the EA and the Minister have got the message that something needs to happen now?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; my apologies. I agree with the Member. It is absolutely clear that special educational needs schools were in crisis pre COVID and that this

situation has exacerbated that further. The Minister owes an explanation not only to the Assembly but, much more importantly, to parents, students and school teachers and staff.

Everyone here agrees that special schools should remain open through the lockdown in order to ensure that children with some of the most complex needs and their families can be supported. However, I have serious concerns about the mitigations and supports that have been put in place. Staff in our special schools are feeling let down; that is what I am told daily. I spoke with a principal last week who told me that a number of parents are opting for remote learning because of fear for their children's well-being. I believe that that is, ultimately, a judgement for parents; however, we need to do much more to reassure them, from an educational well-being perspective. Children benefit from being in the school environment.

I am informed that a number of staff in a school in my constituency are off ill, including some who are recovering from COVID-19 and others who are suffering from anxiety. It must be recognised that social distancing is all but impossible in a special school environment. For the continuation of the service, and for the safety and reassurance of staff, we need high-quality and plentiful PPE to be provided and full engagement with the Department on those issues that are highlighted. Many, I fear, have been left to look after themselves.

I was interested to see the UK Government's attempt to roll out the rapid COVID-19 testing in secondary schools in England. Of course, that has now been delayed. Has the Minister of Education had discussions with the Health Minister for something like that to be provided in our special schools, considering the unique circumstances in which they operate? That would go a long way to reassuring staff and parents as we try to find our way out of the pandemic.

Children have a fundamental right to education. While we face serious challenges, I regret that I do not believe that we are doing enough to support children with special educational needs. The response has been, at best, haphazard, inadequate, in the hope that, perhaps, we would not face further lockdowns. However, that needs to be fixed now.

Looking forward, the Equality Commission has noted that the loss of months of schooling for many children —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Dickson: — will have a detrimental impact on them, and particularly on children from minority and ethnic backgrounds and those with disabilities. It is, therefore, vital that the Education Minister, in addition to acting now, support children with special educational needs and outline his plans for how he will support them and to recover.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Education for bringing this important motion to the House. It is clear that the pandemic has been very hard for many in our community, none more so than those vulnerable children and children with special educational needs. Whilst we absolutely should discuss what we can do to ensure that they and their families have adequate support, we should avoid the narrative, as others have mentioned, that everything was rosy before the pandemic.

Let us not forget that special educational needs schools have been starved of funding for so long. They have, disgracefully, been forced to fundraise themselves for necessary items such as special needs swings and other devices. Let us not forget about plans not so long ago — by this Minister as well, I think — to close special needs schools and current attempts to, possibly, go down that path again in the middle of a pandemic.

Many years ago, the writer Naomi Klein warned about a "shock doctrine" approach in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, which saw the full-scale privatisation of schools and housing in New Orleans. There cannot be a "shock doctrine" approach to education in which the pandemic is used to underfund, close or amalgamate special needs schools. I will not stand for it, and I know that teachers, parents and the trade unions will not stand for it either.

Truth be told, many people have been appalled — outraged, even — by the Minister's apparent ignorance of and dismissiveness towards warnings about the safety of keeping staff and pupils in schools in the middle of a global pandemic. I suppose that the Minister has been true to his party's form by expressing downright opposition to basic scientific arguments, especially about the virus not being immune from spreading in schools, when repeatedly presented with those arguments.

I have received a lot of correspondence as, I am sure, have others, from staff in SEN schools who are very concerned about how the pandemic has been handled and how the Minister in particular has responded — or not responded — to issues and cases.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the biggest issues that I hear about from teachers in special educational settings is that nobody asked them how they felt or consulted them. They do not feel that they are being listened to. Does the Member agree that the Minister should urgently contact teachers, teaching staff and their unions to ensure that the utmost support is given to our teaching staff and that they have all the resources that they need to continue to deliver education for children with special educational needs?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for her intervention and totally agree with her point. The Minister is part of a body that meets with trade unions, and they have not met since September of last year. That is appalling. The Minister appears to not want to listen to those reps and trade unionists, but he absolutely should. Continuing with that theme, someone who works in education contacted me and said:

"The best place for children and young people to be is in safe schools and colleges. However, there is clear evidence that teachers and educational staff are at higher risk of contracting Coronavirus. Further measures are needed to protect all educational staff from contracting this deadly virus."

The Minister needs to listen to that and to other voices that have expressed similar concerns.

It is worth emphasising that there has been quite a lot of union- and teacher-bashing. Parents, teachers, classroom assistants and all education workers share the same interests. They all want to see pupils educated, but in a safe manner. We should do away with this notion that parents and teaching staff are at loggerheads; they do not have opposing interests. It is quite noticeable that, when trade unions are forcing Governments to retreat and backtrack from previously entrenched positions, the Governments go on the offensive and attack them, as seen most recently in Britain and the South of Ireland.

It is also important to emphasise that the failure of this Executive to implement a zero-COVID strategy has a direct impact on pupils and staff in special educational needs schools. The strategy of living with COVID, agreed, adopted and implemented by this Executive, has seen the pattern of lockdown, surge, lockdown, surge being repeated. That has led to an exponential growth in cases and, tragically, deaths. Despite what the Minister has previously said, schools and pupils have not been immune from the virus and that approach.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way.

Mr Weir: The Member seems to be in some way quoting me. I have indicated that the risk in schools tends to be relatively low, but I have never ever suggested that schools, teachers or pupils are "immune" to the virus. I have never used that terminology. I wish the Member would, at least, quote me accurately.

Mr Carroll: I remind the Minister that he sneered at me when I suggested that pupils needed to wear masks on public transport and had a dismissive attitude towards other Members when they raised issues. He may not have said that they are immune to the virus, but his approach has been inconsistent and dangerous.

For the SEN pupils who have had anxiety or are finding it difficult to understand what is going on, it is even harder for them when the Executive and this Minister are pursuing an approach of lockdown, surge, lockdown, surge, lockdown, surge. A zero-COVID approach offers them hope that there is a way to get a handle on this pandemic, eliminate community transmission and assure pupils, teachers and education assistants that there is an end in sight. It is worth emphasising that, last weekend, concerts were held in New Zealand, with tens of thousands of people —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Carroll: They have had a handful of deaths, and we are looking at more than 2,000 deaths. The Minister should respond and answer the question on whether he will support a zero-COVID approach to support those in SEN schools and the wider public.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member should draw his remarks to a close. I invite the

Minister of Education to respond to the debate. You have up to 20 minutes.

Mr Weir: I thank all Members for their valuable contributions. The tone of the debate has been generally fairly good. Miss Bradshaw made a very pertinent point. I appreciate that it lies beyond my scope and that of the Education Committee; there is a range of crossover issues with Health. I will try to deal with it as best I can. There is close working with Health, and there will be aspects to which the Department of Health is in a better position to respond.

12.00 noon

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion. First, I commend all our school staff who are supporting some of our most vulnerable pupils, and there is a real desire to do that.

I apologise to the House. I was a little late at the start of the debate, but it was for a good reason. Mention has been made by a number of Members of vaccination, and I look particularly to Mr McCrossan and Mr McNulty. I was late because I had a paper on vaccination at the Executive. Given some of the time constraints on Executive members this morning, we were unable to bring that to a complete conclusion. Executive members will debate the paper again on Thursday. It is undoubtedly clear to me —.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr McNulty: Can you confirm what the debate is about? Surely there should be no debate on that: teachers should be prioritised for vaccination, especially in special schools. What is the debate about?

Mr Weir: To be fair and without breaching confidentiality, I say that, because of some of the other discussions and, for instance, meetings organised on the issue of the mother-and-baby situation, there had to be a cut-off point of 11.00 am. We only got about five minutes into the level of discussion. I suspect, Mr McNulty, that, if you and I were around the Executive table, it may be an issue that we would find absolute agreement on. Given the importance of the issue and to be fair to Ministers, it is not something that can simply be bounced through in a matter of a few seconds, but I believe that it will be brought to a conclusion on Thursday. I share with Members a desire to see a prioritisation for education staff, and I think that that needs to be taken on

board by JCVI. A wider discussion is beginning on the issue, and it is important that we make our views clear.

Specifically on special schools, my clear public and private view is that there needs to be a prioritisation for those working in special schools. They need to be part of the current phase. They need to be designated as carers to have the vaccination done. It is undoubtedly the case — we will come on to some of the broader issues on mitigations and actions that can be taken — that vaccination is, particularly for special schools, the game changer. More than any other single intervention, vaccination is the one thing that can give confidence.

It is the case that, for the broader teaching profession and even those working in special educational needs schools, the figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and the PHA suggest that those in education have no greater level of incidence of COVID than any other profession or part of society. It is also undoubtedly the case and is very understandable that social distancing is virtually impossible for those who work closely with children, particularly in special schools, and a number of Members have indicated that. No matter what levels of protection are put in place, there is a limit to what that can provide. It is undoubtedly the case that there is widespread anxiety out there. It strikes me that, while a range of things can be done, the biggest single thing that will impact on confidence and dispel anxiety for parents and, particularly, staff is the vaccination of staff, and that has to be an absolute priority.

It remains an extremely challenging time for special schools. I particularly thank special school principals, teachers and non-teaching staff, who work tirelessly to keep those schools operational and safe. There is a rationale and broad cross-party support for keeping special schools open. Part of the anxiety is that some in special schools will say, "Why are we being kept open when other schools are not or are open on a more restricted basis?". It is undoubtedly the case that what is happening in schools is not the main driver for broader community transfer, and the medical experts will confirm that; it is the wider behavioural aspects.

In the debate, someone mentioned that individual families would want to make choices on whether their children are in school. The position, largely speaking, is that, sometimes because of a particular vulnerability or because the parents are at home and feel in a better

position to look after their children directly, the attendance figures at special schools have been in and around 50%. Some of those 50% are in because parents believe that school is the best educational place for their child, but, for a strong section of that cohort, it is critical to the lives of those children and their families that they are in school. The children are in sometimes for particular medical reasons or mental health reasons, but it is critical that we have it.

Various studies that stretch beyond Education and Health have been done during the pandemic. Mention was made of the analysis that Stranmillis has done, the work of the National Deaf Children's Society, the report of Angel Eyes and the work of the National Autistic Society. There is plenty of data. We try to take account of a lot of that information. There are other bits as well. It is an emotive issue.

The tremendous work of staff on the front line has ensured the continuation of education and support for pupils. That is critical. I appreciate that there are challenges. Support has been ongoing since March, when children of key workers and vulnerable children were prioritised for access to supervised learning as part of the Department's response to support those most in need during the pandemic. The fact that the numbers attending, including special schools, have hovered between 8% and 9% across the board is, I think, an indication of changing patterns of employment and of how parents see schools as a relatively safe place. In many ways, that is a mark of confidence in what schools have done and in what has been put in place.

The current public health crisis became apparent over the Christmas period. Again, as with all matters, I will work with my colleagues in Health. While a particular approach was taken for mainstream schools, as I announced in the Assembly, special schools were to remain open and vulnerable children and key worker children would continue to have access to school. Vulnerable children include, amongst others, all children with statements of special educational need. In order to support schools, my Department issued a contingency framework for vulnerable children and young people to all schools on 31 December. While there was previous guidance, guidance was issued on 8 January by the EA, and bespoke DE guidance for special schools was issued on 21 January. The contingency framework sets out the expectations of how vulnerable children and young people should be supported when schools and other education settings are

directly impacted by restrictions that are put in place as part of the COVID restrictions. The support model that is offered to those pupils will be managed on a tiered basis. We are not quite in the tiers of across the water, but they are on four levels, with the aim being to maintain on-site education where possible and to provide a suitable support plan that meets the individual needs of the child or young person. The current level that schools and education settings are at in the contingency framework is level 2, which means that they are open for vulnerable children and young people. Remote learning requirements and the removal of face-to-face teaching should be temporary and should last no longer than necessary. It will remain under review by the Executive, but, obviously, it will be very dependent on the wider public health situation. I will continue to work closely with the Minister of Health as the situation progresses.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way briefly. Will he provide an update on his response to the Education Committee proposal that he establish a vulnerable children reference group, comprising Education and Health, special schools and parents in order that they can work together to ensure that special schools and, indeed, all SEN provision is sustained in a safe manner?

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to that. We are working with our colleagues in Health to establish that group because it does not lie exclusively within our remit. I will come on in a moment or two to some of the arrangements that are specifically there and to some of the reference actions and, indeed, discussions that are taking place with special schools.

Undoubtedly, Health and Education are providing services against a backdrop of challenging restrictions, and sometimes that will also be because workers have been redeployed. The EA and Health and Social Care bodies continue to work in partnership with schools to facilitate health and education services along with appropriate SEN support and therapies as a priority. Well-being support is being prioritised; indeed, funding has been provided directly to schools for that purpose.

Structures were mentioned. My Department continues to work with Health, and a joint Health and Education oversight group meets weekly to monitor progress, particularly for children with complex needs, and to put in place multidisciplinary local-level solutions where they are required and it is safe and appropriate to do so. EA pupil support services

remain fully operational. They provide a blended approach to remote and in-person support for the most urgent cases of assessment or support, if required. In addition to the ongoing training, advisory and intervention work, an extensive suite of resources, contact details and signposts is available through the EA website.

The Middletown Centre for Autism remains operational for training purposes and support services. It has made a considerable amount of support resources available online to parents, carers and the education workforce, particularly through social media.

There are two other aspects to the structural side of things. First, we are meeting regularly and have had discussions with the trade union side. That engagement is with not only the teaching unions but the non-teaching unions of support staff. Secondly, there is interaction with the special schools' leadership group. It regularly meets officials from the Department and the PHA. The PHA is represented at every meeting, and maybe I did not convey that impression well enough when the Member asked me about it previously. Beyond that, the PHA has offered to speak to some of the special needs schools, because, although some of this is about what can be done to meet needs, it is sometimes about providing reassurance and trying to de-escalate anxiety from a medical point of view.

I will address a couple of the other aspects that were mentioned in the debate before I come to resources. Work is ongoing with the EA on transport. During the current situation, in which there is a level of lockdown, the aim is to ensure that transport remains for those who are attending special schools and facilitated, where it is needed, for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. I appreciate the point that was made about trying to ensure that as many precautions as possible are taken on buses. In normal times, when all are attending, the volume of people on buses makes that difficult. As part of the mitigation measures around the wearing of masks, we have instructed the EA to do spot checks. One of the advantages of the current situation, at least for transport, is that there is an opportunity to spread transport provision so that we can reduce numbers on the buses.

Additional PPE is being made available this week through the EA. It has been procured for children and staff in particular. Higher grade PPE is not needed, but there are specifics that need to be considered. As we know, a number of students do not have the same level of bodily

control as others. Therefore, this PPE is a bit more resistant if, for example, somebody tries to take it off somebody else's face. I take on board what has been said. Ms Bradshaw is sceptical about whether the level of PPE is adequate for teachers. To that extent, we will provide whatever is needed and is beneficial. To some extent, we are dependent on circumstances, and occasions on which PPE should be worn still depends on PHA advice. We are not in a position to second-guess. If the PHA says that PPE is necessary, it will be used; if the PHA outlines a circumstance in which PPE is not needed, it is difficult to impose wearing it.

I can provide reassurance. I think that it was Mr Dickson who raised the issue of testing and tracing. There should be an announcement shortly about that. Before Christmas, a pilot programme was carried out in a couple of post-primary schools. The aim is a weekly roll-out of test and trace for special schools. I am working with the PHA on that. It is close to fruition. One of the problems is asymptomatic children and staff, and it is critical that they are targeted through the programme.

12.15 pm

On the issue of resources, an additional £27.4 million has been allocated to the EA for SEN, and that includes money for SEN pupil support. On top of that, to mitigate the additional costs of COVID-19 for SEN support, I included £6.9 million directly. That also covers SEN children in mainstream schools and pupil support.

Mention has been made of the Engage programme. Work has been done to deliver that on the ground specifically for special schools. As well as the Engage money, additional money has been made available to help address the adverse impact of school closures. The Member said that special schools did not receive that funding. Special schools do not receive funding directly into their own budgets, however. That is a difference between them and mainstream schools. Instead, the money is spent by the EA.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am a bit tight for time. I am happy to talk at a social distance to the Member afterwards if he has a particular issue.

We have made various resource bids at times for additional money, and as recently as the January monitoring round, but sometimes, because of COVID, we have had easements to

meet pressures. That is money that we have been unable to spend that has been reallocated. Where we have made no bid, it is sometimes because those needs are being met from within existing budgets.

Mr McNulty mentioned a recharge programme. We have made it very clear that, given the extent of the interruption that has taken place, the Engage programme has largely worked well. We want to see it operating for a second year, and we are taking bids for it.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I know that the Member wants in.

The only complication is that running Engage for a second year will probably lead to an increase in the funding that will be sought. Although the Executive have had around £3 billion allocated by Westminster for COVID, the figure for 2021-22 will be considerably smaller. Even with a rollover, it may be somewhere in the region of £0.5 billion, and it will certainly be less than £1 billion.

I continue to impress on my Executive colleagues the need for funding. Any resource that we can find or that is needed will be applied. A lot of the issues are not necessarily resource issues, however. For example, one of the issues that has been raised is the need for substitute teachers for special schools. Work is ongoing to create a pool of substitutes, but, when staff are unable to be in school, the pool of specialist teachers who have particular experience in special schools is small. It is much more difficult to draw down teachers for special schools than it is to draw them from the mainstream schools' substitute list. We need people with a specialism to teach in a special school.

All action will be taken. Any request from a special school that we can meet will be met. Sometimes, however, the issue is not necessarily money. It may well be the approach that has been taken.

As I have stated a number of times, I want to see the resumption of face-to-face teaching at the earliest opportunity. It is the best education provision and support. We need a safe and welcoming environment for all our staff and children. While our battle with COVID-19 continues, I am working to ensure that appropriate measures and resources are in place to secure access to education provision. SEN provision supports our most vulnerable children, who need and deserve it to negate the adverse impact of the pandemic. For all

children but particularly for SEN children, some of the pressures on their mental health and that of others —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: Ultimately, the physical safety, mental health and well-being of all pupils and staff throughout the pandemic remains paramount.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Karen Mullan to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Ms Mullan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education): On the behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister and all the contributors to the debate. I expect that the discussion will continue online or through other media for quite a while.

I begin by referring to vulnerable children — those with special educational needs — and how they, their families and their schools have been supported during the pandemic.

When the present crisis abates, there will be considerable focus on how we have managed educational provision during these unprecedented times. A key measure of the Department's effectiveness will be how we ensure continuity, continuity — I cannot even say it.

Mr McCrossan: Continuity.

Mr Weir: Continuity.

Ms Mullan: Continuity of support for those who are clearly most in need. Thank you.

Mr Weir: You are getting cross-party help.

Ms Mullan: I know. I need some educational support.

I hope that, following the debate, we will see a multidisciplinary, cross-departmental, coherent and permanent process for ensuring that vulnerable children gain consistent access to special educational needs support during and after the pandemic. I hope that that will include a transparent, single-point-of-entry process with a named officer responsible for each child. I hope also that we will secure the associated resources required to cover those services for all future pandemic-related disruptions to education and beyond.

I turn now to the contributions to today's debate. I thank all Members who spoke, my fellow members of the Education Committee and the Minister for his presence and his response. I will try my best to do justice to the many valuable contributions and to fit them all in.

By way of an overview, all Members supported the motion and thanked and paid tribute to our school staff, particularly those in our special schools, the community, parents, pupils and stakeholders. All Members raised concerns about special school support, the resources, the guidance and the safety. Members also supported the vaccination of school staff, with a priority for special schools. I know that the Minister gave us an update on the meeting this morning, but it is disappointing that we are still talking about the need to vaccinate staff, particularly staff in special schools — that should have been done by now — and those in the mainstream schools that are also open. We need to move on that very quickly. I acknowledge the Minister's position. He gave an update on the priorities for the vaccination and recognised that that will reduce anxiety among staff, so thank you, Minister, for that.

First, the Chair of the Education Committee, Chris Lyttle, spoke about the limited access to special schools in the last lockdown and how the Committee was concerned about the services available to children with special educational needs during that period. He spoke about how the Committee, during that time and since then, has been prioritising needs and engaging with stakeholders, parents and others. He pointed to the event that we held in December at which we as Committee members heard how schools and parents felt abandoned during that period, particularly those with autistic children. He went on to speak in his role as an Alliance MLA. Again, he spoke about parents feeling abandoned and struggling. He asked that the Minister give more clarity on support, safety, resources and the vaccination.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. I take the opportunity to thank the Deputy Chairperson for her service on the Education Committee and for her effective advocacy on behalf of the education sector on a wide range of issues from special educational needs to free school meals to youth services. She has made a valuable contribution to important work that often goes unnoticed and unreported, and we are very grateful for that. Thank you.

Mr Weir: You can put that in your election literature.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Chair. I think that the Minister might be glad that I am moving on. I very much welcome your comments. It has been a real pleasure to work with the members of the Committee and the vast number of people whom I have met throughout the sector.

Mr Humphrey raised the worsening situation around statementing pressures. He spoke about what families have had to deal with and the devastating impact that the closure of services during lockdown has had. He also raised, as many other Members did, the issue of social distancing and the wearing of PPE.

My colleague Nicola also spoke about the impact that the loss of services, particularly therapeutic services and respite, had on children and their families and the heartbreaking reality that many families are going through still, not just in the last lockdown.

Daniel McCrossan made a personal contribution in relation to his nephew and commended his local school for the support that it has provided to his family. He outlined the need for complete change on this from the Minister and the lack of expert-led support and guidance for special schools from the Minister and his Department. He said that more support was needed in special schools and that vaccination must be prioritised.

Robbie Butler outlined the huge impact on families. He talked about how the temporary removal of the provisions in the Education Order goes against everything that we know to be right. He made the relevant point that the effects on these children will be long-lasting rather than temporary. He also quoted statistics from the National Autistic Society and talked about the vital need to monitor, liaise on and review everything.

Mr Newton outlined the difficulties for special schools and said that it was a privilege for him to speak up for children with special educational needs. He outlined the budgetary pressures prior to the pandemic and the need for resources to be in place.

My colleague Órlaithí Flynn also raised that but focused particularly on the mental health and isolation of families and pupils. She talked about how they feel abandoned, the further impacts of the pandemic and how we must find a way to provide support to all those people.

Maurice Bradley was also concerned about respite and the lack of support for children and parents. He highlighted the disparity in provision.

Justin McNulty highlighted the absence, loss or removal of other allied services and the impact that the lack of support has had on young people's routine and their families and how we need to learn lessons from that.

Rosemary Barton commented on the impact on young people's education and on how many have suffered greatly from the loss of their routine, which has continued into the second lockdown. She said that we need to plan better for children with special educational needs.

Paula Bradshaw focused on health. She pointed to the lack of funding and the need for early years intervention and to work more closely with stakeholders, particularly those with a focus on children and young people. She said that the Department, the Minister and the Education Authority should do better in relation to that.

Clare Bailey raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 and talked about how it had exacerbated existing issues with special educational needs.

Stewart Dickson outlined the loss of services and asked how the Department and the Minister would support the Royal College of Occupational Therapists to get back to work.

Gerry Carroll pointed to the underfunding of special schools and SEN before the pandemic and said that all was not rosy in the garden before it.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Is the Member concerned that, in answer to my question on 4 December, the Minister stated that the last meeting of the Department of Education employer and trade union consultation subgroup was on 8 September and that there was a period of at least two months last year when the Minister did not meet that body of trade union representatives?

Ms Mullan: Yes. I was just coming on to the fact that you outlined engagement with unions and teaching staff. That is something that we —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Mullan: Yes. Finally, the Minister answered many of the points in his contribution. He pointed to data and reports that have informed educational openings in the current lockdown, along with Health. He outlined his Department's support and the partnership working and funding that is happening in this lockdown. I

welcome the Minister's giving us that update. I ask the Minister to take away from today that there is a need to do better for children —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Ms Mullan: — with special educational needs and their families.

12.30 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the numerous stakeholder reports relating to the adverse impact of the pandemic on access to special educational needs (SEN) support for vulnerable children; calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward appropriate measures in order to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to special educational needs support for all vulnerable children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Executive to provide the associated resources required to cover these services for all future pandemic-related disruptions to education.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members will have been recently notified that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will make a statement later this afternoon, after Question Time, on mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries.

The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm and to reconvene with questions to the Minister of Education.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed, I remind Members that only one Minister will respond to questions for oral answer today. The remaining Assembly business will resume promptly at 2.45 pm.

Education

Key Workers' Children: In-school Teaching

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education whether the uptake of in-school teaching for key workers requires the criteria to be revisited. (AQO 1458/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. The Department does weekly surveys. The latest data, which includes responses from around 75% of all school and preschool education settings, reported almost 12,500 key-worker children being located on-site on Monday 18 January. On the pure figures, that equates to around 4% of all pupils, but, given the fact that they show responses from 75% of settings, you could extrapolate a little further. Those figures do not include children in special schools, which have been asked to reopen for all children.

The majority of those key-worker children, about 10,500, are attending primary schools. As the majority of those numbers relate to children attending special schools, the number of children of key workers attending mainstream schools is low enough that there is no reason to assume that social-distancing regulations cannot be adhered to.

Across the board, the overall attendance at primary schools is around 9.5%, post-primary school attendance is running at about 5% or 6% and special school attendance is in or around 50%. The latest overall figures for attendance, including all categories, show attendance at around 8.6%, which fluctuated between about 8.9% and 8.2% across the day.

On 8 June, the Executive, in line with their coronavirus recovery plan, extended the criteria for key workers. The definition of key workers

was agreed, and there is currently no evidence that the criteria need to be revisited.

Mr Allister: I must tell the Minister that I know of a number of schools in my constituency in which the attendance level is much higher than 8%, 9% or 10%. I can think of one school, where, I am told, the attendance level is in excess of 25%. Such a situation is unfair to the pupils who have to be taught at home and to the teachers who have to juggle teaching at home and in the classroom. It also defeats the purpose, if there ever was a public health reason, of closing our schools if there is a quantum of up to 25% of pupils in school.

Given that there has been that extensive increase since the previous lockdown, would it not be more prudent to have the key-worker criteria as two parents, if there are two parents in the house, rather than one? I have been told of cases in which there is one key-worker parent and a non-working parent at home and the kids are in school. Is that what it is meant to be like?

Mr Weir: The definition has been consistent from the start. Not all schools have applied it in that way, but, from the first lockdown, it was based on one key worker.

The Member can highlight some schools that are outliers with the percentages attending, but, if you talk to the medical experts, you will find that it is not that schools are unsafe places. The principal aim of closing schools was to reduce the overall level of contacts in society and, indeed, to address the behavioural impact of schools being open. There is a limited level of risk directly in a school. The principal problem is the behavioural aspects outside the school. Having a situation in which, across the board, more than 90% of children are not in school, removes a considerable element of the levels of contacts.

Different families will operate in different ways. Part of the point of needing only a single key worker is to try to ensure that key workers are available for work in all circumstances. For example, if you take the case, as it is in many cases, of a family in which there is one key worker and one non-key worker and there is a choice of who will go into work, it may be that the key worker is much less well paid. If they have to remain in the home, there is a risk of society being deprived of key workers.

All things are always kept under review, and the definitions have not principally changed. There is a broad acceptance that parents are

generally confident about their children being in school, and that has arisen through the figures, but, across the board, the figures, which have been fairly consistent over the last three weeks, suggest that more than 90% of families do not have children in school. I see that my time is up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the next Member, by way of housekeeping, I will say that question 2 has been withdrawn.

Ms Mullan: Given the need to deliver effective remote learning, has the Department sought assistance or received offers of support from internet providers in order to address poor broadband for pupils? Are there any plans — I wrote to you about this matter — to provide data to pupils and families who are struggling?

Mr Weir: On support, we have worked with BT to provide additional coverage. There are two aspects to that that can then boost the numbers, and that has been done. The issue will be that, until Project Stratum rolls out, in certain geographical areas, irrespective of what an internet provider is trying to do and regardless of the devices, there will be a limit to what can be provided. As part of that, the Education Authority (EA), which is currently procuring an additional 10,500 devices to add to the 24,000 that are out there largely to try to ease that burden. However, as the Member will be aware, while connectivity issues and issues with the number of devices are important issues with remote learning, the bigger problem is that remote learning is still not as good as face-to-face learning from the point of view of enabling children to have direct focus. In any circumstances, it is difficult to overcome that other than through face-to-face teaching.

Mr McNulty: It is an incredible situation. Parents and children are dying for schools to reopen and to get back to school. Will the Minister outline what advice he has got from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) about potentially reopening schools in February?

Mr Weir: The Member will forgive me, because there is a limited amount that I can say. The intention is to bring a paper on the wider situation to the Executive on Thursday. I cannot really pre-empt that paper. The Executive will take their decision. We will always work closely with the Chief Medical Officer in particular. The Chief Scientific Adviser is not actually in place at the moment in that regard, but we will work with those key medical experts, and that will form a key part of the thinking as we move

ahead; indeed, I think that my officials were meeting the Public Health Agency (PHA) to discuss issues as well. I share the Member's view that the sooner we can get back to a situation in which there is direct face-to-face teaching in a safe manner that is compatible with public health, the better for all of us, whether that is parents, teachers and particularly the children.

Remote Learning

3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of remote learning during the current restrictions in schools. (AQO 1460/17-22)

Mr Weir: As a system, we are significantly better prepared and equipped to deliver remote learning than we were last March. Since the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, my Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning. Schools are now implementing those plans to deliver remote learning during the next couple of weeks. Due to the dedication of teachers and school leaders, the vast majority of schools had already been delivering remote learning where and when it was needed during the autumn term, continually improving their provision in line with expectations and emerging best practice.

At the beginning of January, my Department issued an educational continuity direction, which makes it a legal requirement for all preschool settings and primary and post-primary schools to provide remote learning. Alongside the direction, my Department published further detailed guidance for schools on supporting remote learning. That provides additional advice and guidance to schools about how they can tailor and adapt the delivery of the curriculum. Schools are required to have regard to that guidance.

There is much good practice across our system, and my Department is monitoring the implementation of remote learning through the school managing authorities, which will work to support schools that have any difficulties.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome the guidance that has been issued on remote learning. I know that he will agree that face-to-face teaching is the most appropriate but that we have to be mindful of the health advice. Will the Minister outline what additional resources have been provided to support remote learning?

Mr Weir: About an additional £7 million has been provided to support remote learning this year. That has enabled up to 24,000 devices to be made available for learners and to continue to improve online services. The scheme to provide the devices and Wi-Fi access to the educationally disadvantaged to support access to remote learning remains open, and, as I said, the EA is procuring more devices.

As well as the money side of it, there are resources in terms of guidance materials and case studies to support learning. Those have been produced by the Department as part of a continuity of learning programme. Through C2k, the EA has developed My-School, which is a website of best resources that provides a gateway to access online teacher professional learning sessions and webinars. The website collates and makes available the resources and guidance developed through the continuity of learning programme, including newly developed resources and case studies.

Since the start of the process, there have been link officers — they are still in place — for each school, largely through the Education Authority or the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The Department continues to work closely with them, particularly with the ETI, and other educational support bodies to identify additional support materials to be developed at pace.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister provide an update on the EA procurement of funded access to the Seesaw digital learning platform for schools to aid remote learning among students, teachers, and parents and guardians?

Mr Weir: I do not have the direct information on Seesaw, but I will get it to the Member.

Mrs Barton: The Member just asked the question that I was going to ask. Is the Minister considering other platforms for primary- and post-primary-school children?

Mr Weir: Advice comes from the EA through its C2k side. That can help primary schools and, in particular, teachers. We are open to any other suggestions. Through the continuity of learning programme, we try to channel those. No one is a fount of all wisdom on these things. As we move further into lockdown, we are developing programmes all the time, and we are open to doing that. Obviously, we have to make sure that what is there is quality controlled and appropriate to a child's age.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): A fair bit of interest is being shown in this topic, so I will go beyond the standard two additional questions.

Ms Brogan: I raised with Mr Weir previously the issue of the digital gap that has been made more evident because of remote learning. As has been said, families struggle to access support for IT devices and printers. In my constituency of West Tyrone, families struggle with access to adequate internet connectivity.

Given the availability of significant COVID support funding, as set out by the Finance Minister yesterday, will the Minister submit a further bid for funding to scale up the provision of devices and equip pupils with internet connectivity?

Mr Weir: We have put in a range of additional bids that equate to around £18 million, which, I think, have been accepted by the Finance Minister. Much of that is to sponsor the additional devices that the EA is providing. We are in constant iteration, particularly with the EA. Given the funding that is available, there is no lack of willingness on our part. It is just a question of how quickly certain things can be delivered. With devices, there is a procurement time lag, which is still difficult to overcome in the short term. However, there will be additional devices.

As I said, we have also made some tools available, such as MiFi and BT access, but we do run into a problem. The Member correctly identified that the problem with a lot of households is not the lack of a device but the fact that a number of family members are pursuing that device.

2.15 pm

As I have indicated, the other thing that is difficult to overcome is that, geographically, there will be some parts of Northern Ireland where, no matter what you are able to put in, because of the lack of broader internet access, some schools will have to operate in a slightly different sphere. That is simply because, no matter what can be done from the education end, there is not always going to be that availability for those children. We are, however, constantly liaising with the EA to see whether anything additional can be done to stretch what can be provided. Given the broader financial position, the lack of finance is not the issue. Rather, it is how quickly, from a public procurement point of view, things can be turned around on some of the issues.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I have a brief point to make that follows on from what some other Members have said. Some would argue that C2k is largely no longer fit for purpose, given that it is 20 years old. That needs to be addressed, and I know that the Minister has acknowledged that. Seesaw is worth considering. Some other Members and I have had a rundown on it, and it looks as though it is a very good and appropriate programme.

Can the Minister outline what analysis his Department has conducted on the impact of remote learning on children from a deprived background and whether mitigations have been sufficient to address educational underachievement?

Mr Weir: I indicated in the previous debate that a number of reports have been done. There is no doubt that remote learning will have an impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Again, the issue is not simply one of access to devices. All children will flourish best in an environment in which they are in a face-to-face teaching situation. As I indicated, there is a strong need. This year, the Engage programme was put in place. We need to look ahead, and bids will be made to the Executive for 2021-22 funding. I know that the Member has been active on that particular front, so I should indicate that those who have been engaged through Engage will continue to be. As far as is possible, schools are trying to deliver what they can through remote learning.

I appreciate that a lot of schools will have tried to focus on small groups. That is not impossible, but it becomes more difficult using remote learning. It is imperative that the Executive look favourably on any proposals to roll out the programme. There may be times when the Member and I are metaphorically on a see-saw. We occasionally struggle to be level on it, but I know that quite a lot of schools, particularly during lockdown and particularly primary schools, have used Seesaw. It is therefore not something that has appeared overnight. It is a good example of some of the platforms that can be used by primary schools, and, indeed, it is widely used by them.

Mr Carroll: My question follows on from those on the digital divide. Minister, can you guarantee that all pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will have access to a digital device and free access to the internet?

Mr Weir: I do not think that that guarantee can be given for every individual across the board. We are trying to procure the maximum number

of devices. Can that be done in every individual case? Unfortunately, achieving that will be difficult. As I indicated, it is rarely about devices. Indeed, the feedback from schools that we got, which we used when procuring the first round of devices, was around what the needs out there are. Even out of the initial 24,000 devices, a small number are still available and eligible to be claimed.

It would, however, be foolhardy to give a guarantee that every single person will be able to receive everything that is needed. All of us can do only the best that we can. It also highlights the fact that, beyond simply the lockdown period, there will inevitably be a need for some catch-up to be done and a need for investment in the resources required for our students as we move into the next financial year.

Post-primary Admissions: Academic Criteria

4. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Education what alternative data he has recommended to schools to use as a proxy for academic criteria in post-primary admissions. (AQO 1461/17-22)

Mr Weir: The use of academic selection in their admissions criteria is a decision for boards of governors. It is not something that is just their general responsibility. They have the legal authority.

I have therefore reminded schools that are considering using academic selection or, indeed, any form of criteria, particularly in the absence of the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) assessments, that they should ensure that any alternative approaches are robust and are supported by legal advice and that the process that they have adopted can clearly and objectively select pupils for admission. There is no single set of criteria that we have been recommending to schools.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. Hopefully, he will accept that a lack of contingency planning has caused anxiety for many children and families across Northern Ireland. With regard to that, why does the Minister refuse to use his powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to direct the use of common contingency criteria for post-primary admissions in order to insert some consistency and certainty in the exceptional circumstances of this year?

Mr Weir: There are a number of reasons for that. With regard to that direction, the Member mentioned the Education Order. The power for the Department to direct in those circumstances can be triggered only when the Assembly has taken a vote on whether it wishes academic or non-academic criteria to be used. It can be triggered only once that decision is made. Therefore, that power is not open to the Department directly unless some previous steps have been taken. Looking across and around the Chamber, I suspect that a consensus on whether to have academic selection or not will elude us for many a year.

The Coronavirus Act deals principally with the measures to be taken with regard to childcare in schools, opening or closure, directions for opening and the means. To stretch that in order to put in place what the criteria should be would be legally questionable and, certainly, would be beyond the intention of the Coronavirus Act. The other factor is that, politically and, indeed, between schools, there is no consensus on what the criteria should be. There are a wide range of schools, some of which are keen to embrace academic selection — there is a legal right for them to do that — and some of which would never support academic selection at all. The Member needs to be aware that, if we were to impose criteria on schools against their will, we would have to square that circle as well.

Boards of governors have the legal authority to set their criteria. We may have different views on what the ideal criteria should be. Guidance is given on what is reasonable and unreasonable, particularly with regard to academic criteria, but it would certainly be beyond the powers of the Department or myself to impose a one-size-fits-all solution on that basis. I do not believe that there is consensus at any level on what those criteria should be.

Mr Lynch: Following the cancellation of the transfer test, the Minister commented that that would limit children's opportunities. Recently, he visited St Kevin's College, Lisnaskea, with me. It is the best non-selective school in the North of Ireland and outperforms some of the grammar schools. A number of my family, my nieces and nephews, went to the school, and they all went on to third-level education. There were no limits to their education. The Minister's comments were deeply insulting to a majority of those involved in the education system. Will he take the opportunity to withdraw those remarks and apologise to teachers, staff and the pupils who are educated in non-selective schools such as St Kevin's College, Lisnaskea?

Mr Weir: I am well aware of the excellent work that is done in St Kevin's College and other schools across the sector, be they selective or non-selective — or academically selective or non-selective, I should more accurately say, because all schools will employ some level of selection in that regard and do excellent work. From that point of view, I did not make myself as clear as I should have done and apologise for any offence that was caused. What I meant to say — a peril of social media is that your meaning does not always get across — was that, where any pupil is limited in trying to get to the school that they want to get to by factors that are outside their control, that is some level of reduction of opportunity, whether it is a selective school, St Kevin's College or any school. That was the message. I apologise if the language that I used was somewhat clumsy.

We have a system that delivers very well for pupils across all post-primary schools. There is always room for improvement, but, when you compare our performance with that of jurisdictions nearby, you will see that there are excellent opportunities for all here. I feel for any family that is looking to get a child into a particular school and has the door to that school, wherever it is and whatever sector it is in, effectively closed due to circumstances beyond its control.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I thank the Member who asked question. It is a perfect question and is on the issue that has probably caused me most pain during my time on the Education Committee. We have failed 16,000 pupils who, in good faith, were entered for the AQE and GL tests. Had the Minister had the courage, he would have got cross-party support, even from the parties that oppose academic selection, and could have used the coronavirus legislation. That being the case and the disappointment having been caused, what is the Minister doing for those in the P6 cohort, who face doing the exam in November, to protect their rights under the admissions criteria, which exist and have legislative power, to make sure that this debacle is not revisited in November 2021?

Mr Weir: Ultimately, it is still up to boards of governors to decide on selection. As we move into the spring and beyond, we hope that the situation will have eased considerably. It is noticeable that the vast bulk of schools that had been academically selective but moved away from it this year have since, more or less uniformly, indicated that they want to move back to some form of academic selection, which will be available.

Although the Member made very well-intentioned efforts to find a solution, for which I strongly commend him, the problem that many schools found, particularly when they sought advice — we advised them to seek their own advice — that the methodologies for using alternative data were not particularly robust. A small number of schools have used alternative data, but that perhaps explains why the vast majority of schools that are normally academically selective have been reluctant to go down that route. The advice that they have received, particularly from a legal point of view, is that it would be open to challenge.

There is an opportunity for better preparation for November, and I trust that we will be in a better position than across the board to facilitate choices, regardless of the direction that they come from.

Substitute Teachers: Financial Support

5. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce a further financial support scheme for substitute teachers. (AQO 1462/17-22)

Mr Weir: The question probably predated some of the announcements, but I am pleased to confirm that I introduced a further income support scheme for substitute teachers on 22 January. The new scheme will operate under similar arrangements and will effectively echo what was in the scheme that was there from April to June. Details of the scheme are available on the Department of Education website, including information on who is eligible for the scheme, how payments will be calculated and a straightforward online application form. The closing date for the scheme, because it reflects the levels of work that teachers had during that period, is 29 January 2021. I encourage substitute teachers to apply, if they are eligible.

Any substitute teacher with a booking predating any announcements on the current lockdown will have their pay honoured for that. Similarly, on the Engage programme, which was raised by Mr McCrossan and others, quite a number of substitute teachers will have been employed on a short-term basis through that programme. Again, they will still be in a position to deliver that, and they will all be paid for that period.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Minister give an assurance that a scoping exercise has been carried out to ensure that all substitute teachers

who benefited from the previous scheme are included in the new one?

Mr Weir: As has been made clear to teachers, anybody who is eligible is entitled and encouraged to apply. Eligibility may differ slightly between the two schemes in individual cases. To take one example, a substitute teacher who qualified in June of last year would not have been eligible for the first scheme because they would not have had an opportunity to do any substitute work. However, they might have done substitute work in the autumn and so be eligible for the new scheme, whereas they would not have been for the first scheme.

It is entirely open for every teacher to whom this applies to apply for the scheme. There is encouragement. Indeed, there was good uptake of it previously, and there is no bar to anybody who previously received it or to anybody new coming onto it. On the flip side, it may be that some teachers who, although they were eligible previously, have retired and have not done any substitute work during the period in question will not now be eligible. On either side of that line, it would be relatively marginal.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. I call Sinead McLaughlin. I will give you a minute to get rested. That was quick.

COVID-19 Variant: School Safety Measures

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the disturbing revelations about the new variant of COVID-19, which could account for 50% of infections in the North and, even more alarming, is potentially 30% more deadly, what additional safety measures does he plan to implement to protect children and staff in special schools and, more generally, in mainstream schools. (AQT 911/17-22)

Mr Weir: OK. There are a number of points to respond to there. Not to break any confidences from a conversation that I had this morning, but there are a considerable number of question marks around the deadliness of the new variety. The medical profession would say that it is far too early to say. The Prime Minister may have jumped the gun on that. Nevertheless, it is something to be taken seriously.

A range of measures have been put in place across the board for schools. For example, for post-primary schools, the requirement — unless there is a medical excuse — is for pupils to wear a mask. Obviously, we are not at the stage where, apart from key workers' children and vulnerable children, all children are in school. There will be increased surveillance on school buses. We are working to erect signage in every school. A lot of the medical experts have said that what is directly happening in schools is having relatively little impact; it is the behavioural aspects around schools that are important.

For special schools, I have said on a number of occasions that I want to see a swift use of the vaccination process for staff at special schools. Although I think that education staff in general should be prioritised, the vaccine should be targeted at special schools in particular.

From this week, we will roll out and deliver additional PPE. That is not to say that the medical side has recommended that there are additional circumstances in which that is needed. However, one of the concerns, particularly in special schools, would be to have PPE that students are less able to pull off the faces of others.

Fairly soon — imminently — I hope to make an announcement about working with the PHA on additional testing and tracing in special schools.

Ms McLaughlin: All Members know that we have taken extra precautions because of the new variant. It is really important that we make sure that our schools, especially our special schools, are protected. The roll out of the vaccine is very important. I have nothing else to ask because you answered my supplementary question, which was about how quickly you would do that. It is imminent.

Schools: Safe Return

T2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to set out his plan for how and when children will be returned safely to school. (AQT 912/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I said, I will bring a paper to the Executive on Thursday. There will be further discussions on that with the Health Minister this afternoon. Until the Executive take a clear and final decision, I am not in a position to share that information with the Assembly.

I think that all of us accept that we are in a very fluid situation as regards everything to do with COVID, but, if the Executive are able to reach a

decision on Thursday, it is important that it is communicated quickly. It is important that staff, parents and, particularly, children are given as much certainty as possible as we move ahead with regard to the timescale, notwithstanding the fact that everything always has to be kept under review, given the speed of movement of actions.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that a safe return to school has to be a priority for the Assembly and that doing so may require increased social distancing and decreased class sizes, which would, obviously, require extra staff, extra space and extra capacity for digital learning? Has the Minister bid for extra resources of that nature in order to return schools as soon and as safely as possible?

Mr Weir: From the point of view of what would be needed, one of the options on the table is to consider a form of blended learning. Whether that is across the board or for certain year groups would need to be examined. Although some work could be done around the margins with extra staffing and extra space, the practical reality of that will be that some pupils will be in at a particular time and others will be in remote learning.

Last summer, we looked at models that were being developed towards a potential blended learning return, and those models can be utilised, but one of the drawbacks of that would mean that it would not be the basis for a full return. What we looked at last summer, particularly with regard to primary schools, was a situation where there was a rota in the week for when pupils would be in. That would in and of itself enable a greater level of social distancing. A slightly different model would maybe apply to post-primary schools.

As we look ahead to the situation post the half-term break and towards the rest of the academic year, while we hope in the near future to outline some of the issues around qualifications, it may well be that there is a need to concentrate a lot of our actions around those who are receiving the public examination qualifications that are so vital in the educational journey that children will have to make.

Post-primary Education: Opportunities

T3. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education whether he believes that attending a grammar school gives a child greater opportunities. (AQT 913/17-22)

Mr Weir: I addressed that question to some extent in my answer to Seán Lynch. The issue that I have highlighted is that, whenever the opportunity for any child to go to a particular school in whatever sector is reduced, that reduces the level of opportunity. That is true of any school, whether it is academically selective or non-selective. We have schools across the board that deliver very strongly for all our children, but, at a broader level, in any sense, whenever parental choice is limited, that reduces individual choices for children and their families.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for that. I find his answer somewhat disappointing, given that 20% of children who want to attend integrated schools have that opportunity turned down because there are not enough places. Will he confirm that his job is to ensure that all children have equal educational opportunities and that, therefore, all schools should be pushed in the direction of providing all opportunities?

Mr Weir: Certainly, we want to make sure that all children are given the maximum opportunities in life. It means that, from what can be provided in schools, there should be the maximum opportunity for all children. There will probably be certain practical constraints on schools in what can ultimately be delivered, but the aim is to give people as much choice as possible. Critically, as we move ahead, that has not been progressed as quickly as possible. However, when we look to ongoing work that will happen, for example, on the 14-to-19 strategy with the Department for the Economy, it will be not simply about what lies within the school walls but about what happens beyond that and the wider opportunities that can be provided. That level of collaboration will be critical. As we look to expand opportunities for all, that will be one of the critical issues that the independent review of education will look at.

COVID Expenditure: School Budgets

T4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education to confirm that all COVID costs and associated codes accrued by schools in order to keep them open and functioning, including for substitute teachers, will be met outside of school budgets. (AQT 914/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are a couple of points connected to that. There was bidding for funding for that money, and some of that will be a reprioritisation of funding. As part of the overall packages that were sought from the Executive at earlier stages, specific money was

set aside from COVID funding for, in particular, substitute teachers. I mean that money was given to schools rather than to individuals. That money was secured. Financially, the costs were roughly what was needed, with maybe a little bit more required. We found that, from the overall amount that the EA bid for PPE, a certain amount was left over. This is about redirecting some costs.

There has been engagement with a number of schools, and, where specific costs have not been met, through working with those schools and the EA, there will be an opportunity to try to make sure that they are met. Due to a range of factors, the overall impact on school budgets this year has meant that, where schools across the board normally tend to be in a strong deficit, this year there is a reasonable surplus, partly because some of the financial pressures in schools have been reduced. Where there are genuine costs, they will be met centrally from that funding.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister. Many principals and school management teams will be relieved to hear that the money will not come from their central budget. Does the Minister agree that we have a register of qualified, capable, able, willing and waiting substitute teachers who want to engage and to be part of the solution to keep schools open? Will he reach further and engage with those teachers in order to allow them to be active during this time?

Mr Weir: The Member makes a very valid point. That is why the Engage programme runs alongside that. Teachers who are in full-time positions are generally not the principal source from where additional people or teachers can be drawn, so it is about bringing in additional people, and that has been done. We are certainly very open to that. There is a window of opportunity between now and the end of the financial year, so where schools require somebody additional — for example, to try to juggle supervised learning with remote learning — we are open to any suggestions on that. Where somebody is missing because they have had to self-isolate because of COVID, there is an opportunity to bring in staff.

The only caveat that I will add across the board is that it is not an opportunity for schools to say, "We want additional staff to boost our numbers". I am sure that nobody would ever do that, and I do not think that that approach has been taken by schools, but, where there has been any pressure within the system, that has been met. If there is an overhang of something not being met, we will be happy to go back to

examine that and try to provide that support for schools.

Facemasks

T5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the statements that have been made to say that our schools are safe places for children to be educated, with the transmission of the virus taking place outside in playgrounds and so on, and given the fact that schools took mitigating measures to bubble classes and introduce protective measures for teachers, what evidence base was used to force children to wear facemasks for six hours a day, five days a week and what impact assessment was carried out on the children who would be forced to do that. (AQT 915/17-22)

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, we always work and coordinate with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser and take Public Health Agency guidance. What can be done to facilitate the maximum number of pupils being in school should be done. Face coverings have been used in other jurisdictions for post-primary schools. It has not been used or intended to be used for primary schools. As with all these things, it will have some small impact and is an additional safety measure.

In an ideal world, as with a lot of things with COVID, it would not need to be embraced, but we believe that this is an advantage. There will be individual cases, as there are for other regulations, where there will be pupils who are exempt for particular physical or mental health reasons. There is flexibility in the system to build on that.

The implementation of that was announced over Christmas; subsequently, a decision was taken that, for the most part, schools would not remain open. Testing that in the classroom environment has not been able to happen so far.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for topical questions. Members, please take your ease while we prepare the Table for the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Ministerial Statement

Historical Mother-and-baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the First Minister, I remind Members that, in light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, and they can do that by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, no points of order will be taken during the statement or the question period afterwards.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Today, the Executive considered the research report into the operation of mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries in Northern Ireland. First and foremost, we offer our personal thanks to those women and their now-adult children who came forward to contribute to the research. Your voices were silenced for so many years, and that was a significant wrong. As a society, we must acknowledge that and do all that we can to bring the truth of your experience into the open. The report is an important first step towards a full understanding of what happened to thousands of women and their children in our recent past. It helps us to reflect on and recognise how poorly they were treated, often in ways that lacked even a basic level of compassion and kindness.

The full report will be published this afternoon. Victims and survivors have been given advance sight of the research report, advised of its findings and given the opportunity to have their questions answered prior to its going into the public domain. Today, they have been told about the Executive's decision to hold a victim-centred independent investigation into those historical institutions. The investigation will be co-designed with victims and survivors and will give them the opportunity to influence the aim of the investigation, how it should be conducted, who should participate in it, who should chair it and how long it should take. They will also be part of the consideration of

whether the investigation should be statutory or non-statutory. It is intended that the co-design work will be expertly facilitated and will conclude within six months from now.

By way of background, the Executive established an interdepartmental working group in 2016 to gather and consider evidence about the operation of the institutions. The working group was also tasked with examining historical clerical child abuse, which fell outside the remit of the historical institutional abuse inquiry. That work is ongoing. The working group is independently chaired. Its current chair is Judith Gillespie, who has been in the role for less than a year. I acknowledge the commitment, determination and energy that she has brought to the role. We also recognise the work of the previous chairs, Norah Gibbons, who tragically passed away last year, and Peter McBride.

While we talk about "historical institutions", Members should be aware that the last mother-and-baby institution closed its doors as late as 1990. As the recent report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters in the Republic of Ireland shows, the issues of abuse and poor treatment of women at a vulnerable point in their life were not unique to here; indeed, they were part of the culture of a number of countries around the world.

The research that led to the report being published today was undertaken jointly by Queen's University and Ulster University. It examined the operation of mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries in Northern Ireland and the wider historical and social context in which they operated between 1922 and 1990: a 68-year period. The research examined eight mother-and-baby homes, a number of former workhouses and four Magdalene laundries. It involved a literature review and examined archive records, for example those in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Importantly, it sought and obtained the personal testimonies of women with experience of the institutions and their now-adult children. The research is so much richer and real because of that testimony of lived experience. It also obtained oral accounts from others with a connection to the institutions, because they either worked there or were involved in placing women and girls there.

Under the terms of reference for the research, the universities looked at how and why women and girls entered the institutions and where they and their babies went when they left. Living conditions and care arrangements were considered, as were maternal and infant

mortality rates. Given reports elsewhere, the researchers were also asked to determine whether there was evidence to support concerns about post-mortem practices and procedures and whether there was evidence of vaccine or medical trials. There was a specific emphasis on the practice around adoption, particularly consent to adoption.

I will give Members a sense of the headline findings in the research, starting with the mother-and-baby homes. All of us should be shocked to find that over 10,500 women entered mother-and-baby homes over that 68-year period. That is likely to be a conservative estimate. The records relating to mother-and-baby homes are not complete for all the institutions. A high percentage of the women and girls — around 86% — were from Northern Ireland. The others were from outside the jurisdiction. Around 11.5% of the women and girls crossed the border, and a small number came from Great Britain and elsewhere. The youngest child to be admitted was just 12 years old. Shockingly, around a third of those admitted were under the age of 19. The majority were in the 20-to-29 age group. The oldest person to be admitted was a 44-year-old woman. Appallingly, a number were victims of sexual crime, including rape and incest.

The living conditions and care arrangements for women in the mother-and-baby homes are difficult to determine from the archival records, as very little was recorded about them. However, the personal oral testimonies provide a greater insight into the lived experience. While a small number of women offered a more positive account of life in the mother-and-baby homes, others spoke of strenuous physical labour being expected of them late into their pregnancy. On the basis of the information available to the researchers, it is thought that, across the entire period, around 4% of the babies were either stillborn or died shortly after birth. That can be compared with data held by the Registrar General for the period between 1961 and 1980, which indicates that around 7.8% of neonatal babies born outside of marriage died in their first month of life or were stillborn.

The research report does not reach firm conclusions about the rates of infant mortality in mother-and-baby homes. That is mainly because mothers and their children did not remain there for long periods, unlike the position in the Republic of Ireland as outlined in the Commission of Investigation's report. The researchers are clear that firm conclusions can be reached only through an examination of the records of those other institutions that babies

were sent to. Members should note that an estimated 32% of infants were sent to baby homes following separation from their birth mother. Other babies were boarded out, or fostered, in today's terms, and others — around a quarter — were placed for adoption.

Since 1929, when adoption legislation was enacted here, a mother's consent to adoption has been required, although, in later years, a court could dispense with consent in certain circumstances. A number of the oral testimonies raise concerns over the issue of informed consent for adoption. Most commonly, those testimonies feature discussion of the traumatic, and sometimes pressurised, circumstances in which often very young women were asked to make decisions about adoption. In a smaller number of cases, testimonies include allegations of irregularities around the signatures on consent forms. Without access to adoption records, it is difficult to conclude that legal and procedural requirements in adoptions were followed in all cases. Given that some children were transferred to other jurisdictions, including across the border, it could also require access to adoption records held in those jurisdictions.

What is indisputable is that there was a considerable movement of babies from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, in significant numbers: 202 babies from Marianvale from 1957 to 1982; 171 from Marianville from 1950 to 1990; 120 from Mater Dei from 1942 to 1970; and 58 from Thorndale from 1930 to 1970. How that came to be raises many more questions — questions that require answers.

The Health Minister, Judith Gillespie and the deputy First Minister and I have already raised the issue with the Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in the Republic of Ireland, Roderic O'Gorman. He has committed to considering the scope for cooperation in the area of adoption linked to mother-and-baby homes. I put on record the sensitivity around adoption: many women and adopted children may not want to be found. We need to always be mindful of that and to respect the rights and wishes of individuals.

I move now to the Magdalene laundries. Nearly 3,000 girls and women are estimated to have entered the three Good Shepherd/St Mary's homes, and a further 707 women and girls entered Thorndale industrial home, which operated as a "girls' training home" and as a probation home for women sent by the police, courts and social services. Women and girls entered by a number of routes, one of which

was from mother-and-baby institutions. Women with learning disabilities and mental health issues also entered these institutions, and there is evidence of admissions triggered by our past: some teenage girls and women were being sheltered from forms of community rough justice.

Oral testimony collected by the researchers, as well as that for the Hart inquiry, suggests that physical punishment was rare in the context of the Good Shepherd laundries here. Instead, discipline was instilled by the regimented regime, and by other forms of punishment. Girls and women were given class names, and there was a significantly greater number of children under the age of 18 in the laundries than the historical institutional abuse inquiry was able to identify. That inquiry concluded that it was unacceptable for such young girls to be expected to do industrial work of this type and considered that it "amounted to systemic abuse". Work was carried out without pay, and some women spent a lifetime in a laundry, died and were buried from there.

I am mindful that this report is following, in quick succession, the publication of the Commission of Investigation's report of two weeks ago. Comparisons will undoubtedly be drawn between both jurisdictions. The research report reveals strong similarities with the experience of women reported by the commission.

3.00 pm

There was huge stigma attached to pregnancy outside marriage. Women and girls were admitted by families, doctors, priests and state agencies. As I have already said, they were required to undertake tough domestic duties late into pregnancy. They had little preparation for childbirth, and some had cold and castigating birth experiences. There were also key differences, but it is for a further investigation to draw those out. I will say more about that shortly.

There was also the cross-border movement of women and children into and out of those institutions. In the same way that women from this jurisdiction were admitted to mother-and-baby homes across the border, as reflected already, women from across the border were also admitted to homes here. Some questions about adoption and infant mortality rates remain unanswered and will require further examination.

We welcome the research report. This is an important day for those women who were resident in mother-and-baby institutions and

Magdalene laundries. The research gives an account of their individual and collective experiences and reminds us of the importance of the developments and progress of recent decades in how we treat the most vulnerable, including children.

It is with huge regret that we acknowledge the pain of those experiences and the hurt caused to women and girls, who did nothing more than be pregnant outside marriage — some of them criminally against their will.

None of us should be proud of how our society shunned women in those circumstances or what they experienced in those institutions. The research is comprehensive — the report runs to around 550 pages — and, as I have said, includes the rich testimony of women and their children with direct personal experience of those institutions.

There are a number of unanswered questions, particularly in relation to adoption and infant mortality. Today, the Executive agreed to undertake a further independent investigation into the institutions. Before I set out what that means, I want to let Members know about a number of other important steps already being taken to ensure appropriate access to records and information relevant to those institutions.

The research identified that many records are not held in appropriate conditions and may be at risk of deterioration. Preserving documents relevant to any investigation is of great importance, as failure to do so could prejudice further work and may hinder the learning of important lessons. It may also hinder the proper recognition of any harm done to individuals and prevent appropriate amends being made to them. Those records are of significant historical importance and may also assist adopted people wishing to trace their birth relatives. As a result, the Health Minister has already written to the relevant institutions and record holders, asking them to ensure that their records are maintained in line with best archival practice, and to take steps now to prevent their destruction.

Tracing in connection with adoption is well established here; it has been in place for more than 30 years. There are plans to develop that further and strengthen existing arrangements under new adoption legislation, the adoption and children Bill, which the Minister of Health intends to introduce in the Chamber in March. There are powers in the Bill to make regulations intended to assist adopted adults to obtain information about their adoption and to facilitate contact between an adopted person, their birth

relatives and, for the first time, birth relatives and descendants of adopted people. Regulations made under the Bill will introduce new legal rights to intermediary and other services, such as counselling or access to information and advice. The draft regulations will be subject to full public consultation, meaning that victims and survivors will have the opportunity to shape them.

The research report, to be published later today, is only the start of a process to allow the long-silenced voices of women and their children to be heard. For too long, they have carried a burden of shame and secrecy. Too often, their treatment by those in positions of power and trust caused them real harm and a lifetime of trauma. Today, the publication of the report shines a light into darkness, but there is more to do.

The Executive today agreed that an independent investigation will be carried out into those institutions, to be shaped by survivors, through a co-design process, and facilitated by experts. We will ensure that their voices are heard loud and clear. Their views will be given primacy in determining the way forward. They will be given the opportunity, over the next six months, to take part in work to define the aims of the investigation, who should take part, who should act as chair and how long it should take to complete. They will also be asked whether it should take place in public and whether it should be framed in law. A statutory public inquiry may well be the outcome of that process, but victims and survivors will be given the opportunity to influence that.

This is a day of mixed emotions. The research report presents a worrying account of what happened to women and girls simply because they were pregnant, and with that comes a real sense of sadness, but I hope that this will be the beginning of a healing journey for thousands of people. Those who were harmed by their experience in those institutions have the right to be heard, both at this time and for the rest of their lifetime.

This is a long and detailed report. It contains important testimony from voices not heard before, and it took tremendous courage from all those who participated in the research. It demonstrates a faith in us and in society that we will properly listen and act to support them now. I commend the research to the House.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the Minister for the statement today. This was, indeed, a shameful chapter from our past. It

was a time that caused much pain and much hurt and has left much anger, and it was a time that has neither been addressed nor appropriately acknowledged. One cannot begin to comprehend the trauma that those mothers were subjected to or the lifelong suffering that resulted for them and their babies. Those precious babies were subjected to such hard conditions, and their life chances were hampered to begin with. How many children in this world go to bed every night wondering who they are, where they are from and what their life history is? They were ripped from their mother's arms, and many were sent to far-flung places. I am so glad that those institutions were closed down a long time ago, but the stench of their legacy hangs over us all until this matter is appropriately, sensitively and finally addressed.

I welcome the inclusion of a substantial co-design process with survivors, and I wish to ask the Minister when that will begin. Does she agree with me that it is essential that, alongside that co-design, which could take up to six months, and any inquiry that follows from it, there will be appropriate support services and redress for survivors to help them? They have waited long enough for this conclusion of a public inquiry; another six-month wait would just be too long.

Mr Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke. Apologies, I call the First Minister.

Mrs Foster: I absolutely agree with all the Chair's sentiments. He said that it was "a long time ago". For those of us who are slightly older, it does not seem that long ago. In 1990, I was 20, so it is not that long ago in my world. We need to reflect today that it is not actually that long ago that those homes were still open.

The co-design process begins immediately. The deputy First Minister and I had the opportunity to meet Judith Gillespie and the reference group before we came here this afternoon, because we wanted to engage with them and reassure them that we want to work with them in designing what it is that they want to see happening as a result of the research. It is important to say that it will begin immediately. When we talk about "six months", we mean "up to six months". We would much prefer it to happen faster than that, and that is the desire of many of the survivors as well.

We are absolutely committed to the provision of appropriate support for survivors, and that has been built into everything that we have been doing in the run-up to today. This morning, officials again discussed with members of the reference group the need for support, and how

they need that support to help them co-design the process, as well as all of the other needs they have. To date, WAVE has been involved in reference group meetings. If there is a need to have any conversations, that support is there. We are also asking the co-design group to consider what further support they may need. That certainly does not need to wait until the conclusion of the six-month process. We are quite happy to have an ongoing, parallel discussion around the supports that need to be put in place.

Mr Clarke: First Minister, you said that this is an important day for those who were in the homes, and I think that we all concur with that. Following on from your response to the Committee Chair, what will the support look like for the many survivors of the homes, in particular those who we are talking about today?

Mrs Foster: It is important to say that the support that is provided will depend on the needs that come forward from the victims themselves. It is important that they tell us the supports that they require. We have put some supports in place already through, as I said, WAVE attending the reference group, but we want to know if there are other issues that we can deal with. You will know from dealing with victims and survivors of any trauma, Mr Clarke, that the needs are different and varied. We need to take that into consideration to make sure that it is a flexible model that we provide for them. It is important that we try to take into account the experiences that they have lived through. This is such an important day for a lot of survivors but, as I said, is also a day of mixed emotions. It is with great sadness that we reach this point and see the extent of what happened in the mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I will start by outlining that we should reach out to the women and girls to support them and to end the silence and shame; that is what we need to do. We need to ensure that all the supports that have been talked about are the right supports to end that silence and shame and to support those women and those who were referred to as illegitimate children. Let us be clear: there are no illegitimate children. Every child born then and born now is legitimate. Every child has a right to know who their parents were and where they came from.

I really welcome the assurances that the Minister has given that this will be victims and survivors centred and that they will guide us in

everything that we do; that is vital. Can she also give us assurances that we will learn from the mistakes that were made during Hart's historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiry? Many victims and survivors were retraumatised, and we need to make sure that we do not make that same mistake again.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her points and commentary, all of which were very well made. It is important to say that we need to learn from all the processes that have happened thus far. I note that some of the survivors were upset by the Commission of Investigation report in the Republic, because they felt that some of its language was too legalistic. Look at the adoption piece, for example. The commission indicated that there was no evidence to say that there were any forced adoptions because there was paperwork to show that the adoptions had been signed off. But of course we do not know the story behind that signature. We do not know what happened to bring about that signature on that piece of paper. It is about trying to get behind that and finding out whether it was actually informed consent or something that the person had to do in those circumstances. We will try to look across what happened not just in the Hart process but in other jurisdictions and to learn from those messages. It was suggested to us that perhaps we need to look at what is happening in countries like New Zealand. We will want to take all those issues into account. I am sure that Judith Gillespie will want to take those into account as she tries to find a way forward that is supportive and gets to the truth.

Mr Beattie: First Minister, thank you for your statement. I look forward to reading the full report, although I am not sure that that is the right use of words.

I look at this as a pure disgrace and a shame on us all, but I have a real concern that maybe we are touching only the tip of the iceberg here. Have we looked at the intergenerational effects of the issue, especially as some of the adopted children went right across the globe, which would have an effect on further family members?

3.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. As I said, one of the issues that we want to look at is the adoption process, because babies were moved after birth into different jurisdictions, and we need to try to understand that. Some went to the United

States of America, for example. How did that happen? What was the process for all that?

I hear what he is saying about intergenerational issues. We know that that is an issue with other victims and survivors, particularly victims of terrorism, who have raised how there can be intergenerational effects. The group should look at that, but, at the moment, we are focusing on the adoption piece and at infant mortality, because that is a concern for us.

Ms Bradshaw: First Minister, you used the word "shunned" in your statement. You will recall that, last September, I asked you specifically whether the victims and survivors from mother-and-baby homes could access the counselling services that were being put in place for the historical institutional abuse victims, and you said no and that it was the responsibility of the Department of Health. A couple of years ago, I asked a very senior official from the Department of Health if he would put in more resources for contact tracing for people, and he said no. Why, all of a sudden, has this become an issue? Is it because the South's commission report has come out? The women involved who are living today still feel shunned. Will you please outline what additional financial resources you and the Department of Finance will put into that? Those are all very warm, woolly words today, but victims and survivors expect a lot more.

Mrs Foster: I am disappointed with that reaction, because this is not about warm, woolly words; it is about action. When we met the victims' reference group today, we were very clear about that. We want to ensure that there is action, but we also want to ensure that it is the correct action and that the correct services are put in place. We could put a whole range of services in place, but if they are not appropriate and needed, frankly, what is the point of doing that?

When we talk about moving forward, it is right that we realise what happened in the past. The terms of reference for the historical institutional abuse inquiry were finalised in 2012. At that time, there was very little research on mother-and-baby homes. Indeed, there was a belief that most people in the Magdalene laundries were over 18. It has turned out that a third of the people in the Magdalene laundries were under that age. A lot of research has been carried out, and I commend the research teams not only for what they brought forward today but for the manner in which they went about their research. They looked at the literature review, they looked at archive documents and went to PRONI, but they also engaged with very many

people who had been in the institutions as residents and with some staff members and people who referred others to the homes, so we get a rounded story and a very clear picture of what was going on at that time.

We will, of course, put funds into services and support, but they have to be the correct services and the correct support. We have given a commitment to the victims today that that support will be there.

Mr Robinson: I am sure that all Members will agree that this is a shameful and horrific report about so many innocent human beings, namely women and small children. Will the First Minister outline what key differences are emerging between what happened in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland?

Mrs Foster: As I said, there are a lot of similarities between what happened in the Republic of Ireland's jurisdiction and in our jurisdiction, but there are a number of differences. For example, there is no evidence of some of the appalling living conditions that were found by the commission. Indeed, there were expectations that living conditions in institutions here were of a higher standard than those in the general population. There were no unaccompanied children in mother-and-baby homes here, although that may have been the case earlier in some of the workhouses. Women gave birth here in hospitals or in private nursing homes, not in mother-and-baby homes, as happened in the Republic of Ireland. We think that, as a result, maternal mortality was not as big an issue here.

Women also seem to have stayed for shorter periods in mother-and-baby homes, and women and babies appear to have left at the same time. The adoption legislation was also different, but, as I said, we will look into the whole issue of adoption and conduct more research. Importantly, there was no evidence of vaccine trials. There was a lot of concern about that because of what happened elsewhere.

There were, of course, the same issues of stigma here as in the Republic of Ireland, but there were also differences. Those will be reflected when people look at the research report.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the First Minister for her statement. It is quite a harrowing report.

Minister, on an island that has faced more than its fair share of torture and abuse, it never ceases to shock me when I hear reports of the

abuse and violence that our women and children faced when they were supposed to be under the care of the state or states and the Churches on this island. Does the Minister agree that what was behind that was state-institutionalised misogyny and that the victims of that abuse, torture and those human rights abuses are completely blameless?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. To put it in context, you have to look at society during those years and the attitude towards women who became pregnant at a young age. For me, the most difficult part of the research was reading about children who were raped or were the victims of incest, and who were victimised again by being put into those homes. It was not their fault that they were raped or were the victims of incest, yet they were the ones who suffered, and it appears that those who perpetrated the crimes got off scot-free. There is a huge issue with that, and we need to look at that and ask ourselves some pretty difficult questions about society.

Last night, I reflected to one of the victims and survivors that we sometimes look back with rose-tinted glasses and refer to the "good old days". There was nothing good about what happened to those children and women. We need to reflect on that and work with the victims and survivors to make sure that their voices are heard. Importantly, we also need to state, very clearly and unequivocally, that it was so wrong.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for what was a very emotive statement, some of which was extremely distressing to hear. The statement refers to young women having to go to those places to escape "community rough justice". Will the First Minister indicate the context of that and whether it will be a key area of examination for the independent investigation? Given that some of this dates to relatively recent times — the 1990s — might there be a prospect of criminal justice outcomes in the future?

Mrs Foster: The Member raises a very interesting point that came from evidence from the laundries. In St Mary's laundry in Londonderry, there were references to:

"a number of girls and women deemed to be in a crisis situation arising from the Troubles."

For example:

"In 1972, [a girl], aged 18, was brought to the Good Shepherd Convent by the police

who had rescued her from being tarred and feathered. It is not clear why she was under threat of ... communal rough justice ... In 1973, R. arrived at the convent accompanied by a Protestant clergyman. She had a Catholic boyfriend and the UDA had threatened her. In 1976, 16-year-old C. was placed in St Mary's ... by her Parish Priest because an army officer had complained to her mother that she had been frequenting an army base."

Those are reasons that young women were put into Magdalene laundries. I find that incredible, and people will be shocked to read that. There are also references to women coming to the Belfast laundry to escape communal rough justice.

If, after looking at that, there is evidence, it should absolutely be investigated by the police to see what can be done.

Mr Lynch: I thank the First Minister for her statement. What efforts are being made to contact victims and survivors overseas, such as those in America, who may or may not be aware of this report or of any redress support to which they are entitled?

Mrs Foster: The Member touches on the redress issue. After the commissioning of an investigation in the Republic of Ireland, a number of issues were identified that needed to be taken forward, including redress. We are not at that stage yet, because we have not taken forward the investigation proper, as it were. When we come to that, I am sure that a number of areas will be looked into. A number of children were adopted into different jurisdictions off the island, and how those people can be contacted will cause some concern. We are at the beginning of the process. The research document is very meaningful and gives us a very good starting point from which to move on to the discussion about what happens next, but the issues of redress and contacting people outside the jurisdiction will be worked through during the coming months.

Mr Catney: First Minister and deputy First Minister, I thank you for bringing this very difficult statement to the House. I am thinking of women who are 50 or 60 years of age with children who have gone out. We have to look at this as a societal problem that happened simply because people were worried about their next-door neighbour seeing their young daughter with a swollen belly. Daughters were then sent to those places to be out of sight and out of mind. I beg every Member in every political

party not to play politics. We must get the truth out and give help where it is needed.

First Minister, there are young women — they are older now — who went into the homes but do not want their name to be out there, and we have to accept that. This is a societal problem. This was the way we were, folks. All of us, including our mums, our dads, our brothers, our aunts and our uncles, put girls into those institutions for no other reason than they had made a little mistake. I therefore ask the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all of us here not to play politics with this. We must get to the truth as it is meant to be got to, but we must also bring the healing hand that is required. We can bring that healing hand together, especially in this centenary year of the foundation of Northern Ireland. That is a goal for all of us to unite behind.

Mrs Foster: I absolutely concur with the Member's commentary. Yes, we do have to reflect on actions that were taken in society. That is key. Although the state was a big actor and the Churches were involved, we all need to reflect on the attitudes that existed across society at the time. The research talks about how families had such an influence on some of those women and about how older brothers did not want their sister to bring shame on the family so that is why she was sent away to a mother-and-baby home. There is very little reference to the fathers of any of the children who were born in the homes.

I concur with what the Member said about healing. It is important that we do that right across the piece, because those mother-and-baby homes existed for all of the community, and I referenced that in the statement.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the fact that the report has been compiled. It is very important, and I thank the First Minister for her statement. Will she now address a group of victims who may consider themselves to have been forgotten today? Under the terms of reference of Judith Gillespie's working group, there were three groups covered: those in the mother-and-baby homes; those in the Magdalene laundries; and the victims of historical clerical abuse. To be clear, that means that we offer different regimes of support and opportunities for redress based not on the abuse that a victim suffered but on where it happened. I hope that the First Minister will agree that that is not acceptable and that it would be appropriate to offer a message of acknowledgement and hope to the victims of historical clerical child abuse.

3.30 pm

Mrs Foster: Yes, I absolutely agree with the Member. It does not matter where the abuse took place; it was abuse, and we need to recognise that. I am hopeful that that work will be completed soon. I will come back to the Member with a time frame for that; I do not have it in my notes today. If anyone has suffered clerical abuse and is not covered by the historical institutional abuse team, certainly I cannot see Fiona Ryan, as commissioner, closing the door on those people. If the Member has anyone from that background who is having difficulty in accessing services, he should please let us know, because we want to be as inclusive as we can to support those people and to do what Mr Catney said about trying to heal what happened in the past. We always say that the first thing to do is to acknowledge what has happened. It is important that we acknowledge that, not to point the finger of blame but to acknowledge what has happened, and that we now get into the full investigation, because that is really important.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister for what she has said and recognise that today is an important day for victims and survivors. We will all be thinking of them at this time. It is, indeed, a day of mixed emotions. There is a worrying picture, First Minister, on infant mortality. Can you confirm that that will be one of the areas and key aspects that will be looked at?

Mrs Foster: Yes, we are concerned about infant mortality, because we just do not have the information to hand, so we want to do more work on that. It appears that maternal mortality was better in Northern Ireland, because, it appears, most women went into a hospital or private nursing home to have their babies. What happened directly after they left is something that we are concerned about, and we just want to get to the bottom of that. That is one of the key issues that we will do more research on.

Ms Mullan: I thank the First Minister for the statement. I send my heartfelt thoughts to all victims of the mother-and-baby homes. Like other Members, I believe that it truly was a shameful time in our history. First Minister, what outreach will there be and what further steps taken for victims and survivors who have never come forward about the abuse that they faced?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her comments and her question. When we are dealing with victims and survivors, whether from the Troubles, from historical institutional abuse

or, as in this case, from having been in or having been born in a mother-and-baby home, we have to respect the fact that some people do not want to come forward and reflect on what happened to them. We have to respect the right to privacy of those women and, indeed, of some of those children. What is important is that, if someone wants to come forward and is in need of support, we have the supports in place to make sure that those services are there. That is what we are challenged to do now, and we have to meet that challenge. It is only right that we do.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, First Minister, for your statement. Today, your statement has started to draw back the veil on a difficult time in the history of Northern Ireland. You said that many of the adoptions were cross-border adoptions and that there were incomplete records in respect of those. Can you tell the House what engagement will take place to access those records and archives in the Republic of Ireland and what work will be done on a cross-border basis? You also referred in your statement to the preservation of records now: is that an instruction or a request?

Mrs Foster: To take the last point first, as I understand it, the Minister of Health has written to all the relevant state agencies here to make sure that they protect the documents in our possession so that they are not destroyed. That is really important. I imagine that an instruction such as that from the Minister will be adhered to by those agencies, but I get the point that the Member makes and will take that back to the Minister.

In terms of the adoption records, as you will know, some of those institutions are Church-based, so we will need to engage with some of the Churches.

Others were a step removed from the Churches, although it is clear that there was an influence there when you see the number of referrals and where they came from. An interesting part of the research will be to look at how women ended up in mother-and-baby homes and where were they referred from, so we will need to access Church records.

In relation to the Republic of Ireland, the deputy First Minister and I have already engaged with Roderic O'Gorman, the Minister in the Republic responsible for the issue. That will be an ongoing conversation on the adoption issue.

Ms Ennis: There were no "fallen women" and no "bad women"; there were just women and

girls who were failed by and were victims of the two regressive and repressive regimes that existed on this island. Will the joint First Minister agree that any investigation must include questions about the location of the bodies of babies and children who died in the homes?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. I confirm that we will look into where babies were interred and where their last resting places are. There are distressing accounts of mass graves, and we want to be alert to that and look into it as sensitively as we can, given the horrific nature of some of the burials. We will look in greater detail at infant mortality as we move forward.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. There are no words to articulate adequately the horror of the abuse levelled at those women, levelled in a very unchristian way by Christian organisations.

I will follow on from Sinéad Ennis's question about infant mortality. I know that those babies were put into unmarked graves. I was brought up beside one of the homes, and I knew that there were unmarked graves in the area where that home was. It is now a housing estate. Time is of the essence for us to uncover the graves and to give visibility and dignity to those babies. We can wait to get all our ducks lined up, but housing and planning permissions have taken place since the babies were put in those graves. Is there anything that we can do now to uncover that terrible past and give dignity to those babies?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question and for her point about her area and what she knows about burials. This morning, the urgency of dealing with the issue was raised with us. We were all incredibly moved on the call when the point was made that planning permission will come and there will be no stopping what goes on. We have to respect the dignity of burial places, even though they are unmarked. Judith Gillespie will want to get to that quickly in the work that she is taking forward.

Mr Chambers: Minister, I go back further than being 20 years of age in 1990. I remember, as a teenager going to school each day, walking alongside a long, dark, tall stone wall that would not have been out of place in a prison. I walked that route for seven years and never knew what was on the other side of that wall or what took place there. I now know that it was a mother-and-baby home with a working laundry — out of sight and out of mind. I was blissfully unaware of that operation, and I suspect that society, by

and large, was unaware of it as well. It should be to our regret and shame that we did not ask the questions then.

Would the Minister agree that a more graduated approach to a full public inquiry — you referenced a period of six months — will ensure a more efficient and effective outcome of a much-needed public inquiry?

Mrs Foster: We want to recognise what the Member said about his own memories. It would have been the easiest thing for us today to say that, having looked at the research, we believe that there is a need for a public inquiry.

However, we felt very strongly that it was up to the survivors and victims to design the process that they wanted because — again, referring to other jurisdictions — sometimes, if there is a very legalistic approach, it does not actually capture what happened in those places. I am not prejudging what will come back to us as a recommendation. We will have to wait and see. We hope that the leadership that Judith Gillespie has given to the group and the facilitation that will take place will allow it to come forward with a workable programme that can be taken forward in as short a time as possible.

Ms Bailey: I, too, welcome the long-awaited report. It is an important day for victims and survivors. Not only does it mark the end of one process, it begins the next steps of further processes. I have listened to the comments from the Floor. While the report highlights the culture of misogyny that we all lived under as a society, we should not fool ourselves that it is something in the distant past. It is a culture that is very much present to this day. As legislators, we have a long road ahead of us to acknowledge and address what continues of that legacy. The Minister has already mentioned much of that. I want to raise again the lack of justice for current victims and survivors of rape and abuse today; the fact that we have only just passed the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, the very first Bill of its kind in Northern Ireland; and that family planning and reproductive healthcare is very much a Cinderella service, if a service at all. We should all echo the sentiments that were expressed by Linda Dillon to women and girls today, as well as to those in the past, that there is no shame.

I thank the Minister for her statement, the tone of her words, the publication of this long-awaited report and the very welcome commitments to co-design through working with

the victims and survivors. I have a few questions. When did the Executive have first sight of the report? Further to the Minister's comments about discussions with Roderic O'Gorman, the Minister in the South, and access to records, what can we do immediately, perhaps, about institutions and bodies here in the North that refuse to engage in sharing access between institutions on a cross-border basis?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her comments. When she has the opportunity to look at the full report, when it is published later this afternoon, she will see that every care has been taken by the research team to try to reflect all that went on. To me, the team has done that really well, even by cutting down on academic language so that people would be able to engage with the report in an open way. I welcome that.

The Executive received the paper last evening. We felt that it was important that the victims had first sight of it. Yesterday, there was engagement with the reference group about the executive summary. We received the paper last night. I am pleased to say that there were no leaks about the paper. That is, probably, a first for me, standing here, actually. There was recognition right across the Executive that it was such an important issue that we had to respect the privacy of it until the victims were made aware of the issues and the way forward before the general public. That is really important.

With regard to continual engagement with the Republic of Ireland, we will, certainly, push very hard to have full access to those adoption records — again, respecting individuals' privacy because we absolutely must respect their privacy. There is a need to get further into the whole adoption procedure and whether, indeed, there was informed consent at that time or just a paper consent for a lot of those adoptions.

Mr Carroll: I thank the First Minister for her statement and offer my solidarity and thoughts to all the victims and survivors. The history of mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries is, obviously, a devastating example of institutional abuse here. Such cruelty existed in both religious and state run institutions. Both must be held to account for the crimes that were committed.

I noted the Minister's comments about a public inquiry. Can she assure the House that if the majority of victims want a public inquiry, one will be held?

Will she also assure us that the Executive will not be coy about seizing the assets of religious institutions if they refuse to compensate the victims affected by the report?

3.45 pm

Mrs Foster: First of all, we have been very open about the outcome in terms of an inquiry, so we are not closing our minds to anything that comes from the reference group. It is important that that is the case, because it is up to them to decide what they need.

Secondly, we will continue to engage. It is fair to say that we have been a little disappointed about the engagement with the historical institutional abuse scheme by some of the institutions, but we will continue to push for that, because it is right and proper that there is recognition by the institutions of what went on in the name of religion and society at that time, and there needs to be recompense for that.

Adjourned at 3.46 pm.

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