

ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY AD HOC COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 RESPONSE BY PETER WEIR MLA, MINISTER OF EDUCATION – THURSDAY 21 MAY 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee for the second time, on the work that has been undertaken in the education sector in response to COVID-19.

In opening, may I express my sincere gratitude to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their vital and ongoing contribution at this very difficult time.

We are now in the ninth week of lockdown. In these unprecedented times the education sector has faced many challenges. In a very short timeframe we have put in place policies and procedures to ensure that we continue to meet the learning needs of our pupils as best we can. Throughout this period, we have prioritised the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and that of our staff. Our teachers, school leaders, youth workers and other education partners are continuing to do an excellent job in supporting our children and young people and their families.

My Department's COVID-19 strategy supports the Executive strategy and plan. I have been in regular contact with Ministers in England, Scotland and Wales to share information and to discuss our respective approaches to educational provision during this pandemic.

Our schools and pre-school education settings have remained open to facilitate remote learning and to ensure there is provision for vulnerable children and for children of key workers up to the end of Year 10. Youth Services have also continued to provide support to vulnerable young people.

Since Easter there has been a rise in the number of children attending open schools and although the numbers fluctuate on average, 450 settings have been open daily, with about 2,000 staff supporting supervised learning for around 1,700 children.

The work of the whole education sector has continued to focus on the six priority areas:

- Pay
- Free School Meals
- Support for Vulnerable Children
- Distance Learning
- Examinations
- Support for Key Workers

My Department has also worked with the Department of Health in developing the Childcare Sector Support Scheme.

Income Support Scheme – Substitute Teachers.

Previously, I advised members of a cohort of substitute teachers unable to avail of any financial support through any government schemes related to COVID-19. I have been acutely aware of the concerns of this substitute teaching workforce who no longer have access to secure work. When Her Majesty's Treasury confirmed that these staff are not eligible to be furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, I re-iterated the urgent need for funding from the Executive for an income support scheme, estimated at around £12 million. The Executive confirmed on Tuesday that it is to provide part-funding to the scheme of £4 million. I have re-prioritised my 2020-21 Education budget to meet the balance of £8 million.

I am delighted to advise members that the Department launched the Income Support Scheme for Substitute Teachers on Tuesday. The scheme will ensure that eligible substitute teachers who have worked between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2020, will have access to an income for the period April to June 2020. Applications should be made on-line via the department's website, by Tuesday 26 May.

Free School Meals

Turning to the direct payments scheme I introduced for families whose children are eligible for a Free School Meal. Around 55,000 families have received direct payments into bank accounts from the Education Authority in respect of nearly 99,000 children. There were a number of families for whom we could not make direct payments.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to say that the EA is now issuing individual cheques to over 1,600 families for almost 2,500 children. Payments are backdated to 23rd March 2020. We now have an agreement with the Home Office to make payments to asylum seekers' families through the Aspen card. To date we have made payments, including backdated payments, to 46 families for 82 children. To date, free school meal payments in the region of £10.7 million have been made in respect of around 101,500 children.

While schools remain closed to the majority of pupils, the EA continues to be unable to provide school meals to children entitled to free school meals. A further Notice under the Coronavirus Act has therefore been made today, renewing for a further period of 28 days the existing modifications to the legislation governing school meals. This will allow the EA to continue make direct payments to parents in lieu of free school meals and ensure that families do not experience hardship during school closures. The numbers continue to rise as more families find themselves eligible for free school meals.

The Scheme is due to close from 30 June. My Department does not provide free school meals over the summer holidays. Whilst the Department for Communities has lead responsibility for vulnerable families, no single department has the lead on food poverty and holiday hunger. It will be for the Executive to decide on the way forward over the summer holidays and make provision for the necessary funding to support any interventions. The Department for Communities has announced a number of additional measures to provide food and assistance to vulnerable groups and we continue to work closely with them to ensure food is available to these vulnerable children.

Eat Well, Live Well Programme

Mr Deputy Speaker, as part of the Voluntary and Community Sector response the Education Authority Youth Service is delivering the 'Eat Well, Live Well' programme, with funding provided by the Executive. This provides healthy meals for 3,100 vulnerable young people who remain at risk of hunger despite Free School Meal direct payments. A food box is delivered directly to each young person's home every week, with each box containing provision for five breakfasts and five lunches. Demand has been exceptionally high and the programme reached its maximum capacity within three days of opening.

While the Youth Service has the additional staffing capacity to increase its provision, new registrations and referrals were closed on 29 April in order to remain within the allocated budget. Young people remaining in need are referred to other local food providers through Foodbanks, Department for Communities, local councils and other community based responses.

Vulnerable Children

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have prioritised support for vulnerable children, their parents and carers. I appreciate that school is a protective factor for many vulnerable children. Vulnerable children have been facilitated to attend school where it is in their best interests, and safe and appropriate to do so. The number of vulnerable children attending schools here remains low at approximately 300 - 400 a day but is increasing.

The Education Authority is providing a weekly report to the Department, on the support it is providing to vulnerable children and young people. From 11 May the Education Authority is providing an

additional mechanism through which social workers, parents or guardians can seek a school place for a vulnerable child. Requests for placement are being progressed by Health & Education professionals.

The EA has also established five Virtual Safeguarding Vulnerable Children Groups aligned with the five Health Trust areas. These groups ensure that appropriate safeguarding and child protection responses and referrals are made. In collaboration with PSNI, the EA Youth Service has provided Spaces of Sanctuary for young people at risk of domestic or child abuse.

My Department is also contributing to the Department of Health's cross Departmental Vulnerable Children Action Plan. The plan aims to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people within the home; and within the wider community.

Health and Education Joint Planning Process

A multi-disciplinary joint planning process between Education & Health for children with complex needs who attend special schools is progressing on a Trust by Trust basis and includes Special School principals.

School Admissions

Turning now to school admissions for the next academic year. Primary placement letters issued at the end of April and post-primary placement letters will issue in June. However, open enrolment does not apply to pupils with statements of Special Educational Need. As a result, children with statements of SEN and profound multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties with complex medical needs or a severe learning difficulty have been identified through the statementing process as priority groups for admission to Special School for the 2020-21 academic year. Children with statements of SEN have also been prioritised through the statementing for pre-school admission, P1 and Post primary transitions P7 to Year 8.

Special Educational Needs Framework

Officials are continuing to work towards implementation of the new Special Educational Needs Framework, which will introduce new regulations governing the statutory assessment process. I had intended to consult on both the draft regulations and the draft Code of Practice this spring. That launch date is now under review.

Health & Emotional Well-being

Work is continuing on the Health & Emotional Well-being Framework for education. The target date for completion is December 2020 but will be kept under review.

In terms of the type of support provided in the current context the following measures have been put in place:-

The Independent Counselling Service for Schools is continuing to provide counselling to existing and new post primary pupils either by telephone or video call. The Education Authority's Youth Service has created a 'Stay Connected Initiative' online, to remotely support young people as a result of Covid-19. Within the first four hours the site registered 1,450 views. Additionally, schools are using assessment tools to identify individual emotional needs in children and young people where concern has been raised.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in April we launched the Safer Schools App. This is a digital safeguarding and communication toolkit for school staff, parents and carers. Last Friday, the Safer Schools App for children and young people was launched, providing age appropriate advice on a range of digital issues, including safeguarding on social media platforms, bullying, sexting and emerging online trends. In addition, my Department provides funding to support the NSPCC ChildLine operation here in Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that this crisis is impacting on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our children and young people, and I will be considering how best we can support them when they return to school,

mindful that many will face higher levels of anxiety and distress and will need help with the transition back to school and the impact of the prolonged absence.

Youth Service

The Youth Service also provides support to vulnerable young people. Provision includes one to one support; on line support and communication; via a new Youth Online website; one to one support where appropriate and in a safe way; and support for young people experiencing mental health difficulties. The START programme is continuing to support young people under paramilitary threat.

Distance Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker, providing continuity of learning for our young people is a key focus for the education sector. With very little notice schools were able to make a rapid transition to distance learning. This reflects not only the skills and motivation of our teaching work force but also highlights a number of strengths of our system.

Unlike other education systems we have in place an education technology system which is effectively supporting online learning. Through C2k, the Education Authority delivers a comprehensive range of tools to support teaching and learning. This includes providing devices for teachers and pupils, secure learning platforms, centralised learning resources and professional development resources for teachers.

Advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate points to the need for distance learning provision which is broad and balanced and which emphasises the need for a balance between online learning, written and practical activities, outdoor learning and free time. Reflecting this advice, feedback from school leaders has pointed to a wide range of strategies and resources being adopted by schools.

The findings of a recent survey confirm a blended approach with all schools engaged in distance learning using either online or alternative approaches and many were using both. In Special Schools, packs which contain sensory or physical equipment have been supplied to pupils who need them.

I would also like to pay tribute to parents and carers who are supporting their children's learning during this period. I noted in the findings of a recent survey by Parentkind that the support parents find most helpful for their children is communication from the school and feedback from the teacher.

As well as the C2k facilities, many schools are using digital tools such as their own school text services, websites, social media channels and individual school apps to communicate with parents and pupils. This is going to continue to be very important in the coming months, as we move to a more blended approach to learning with time spent in the classroom and at home.

Another strength of our system is the availability of support from our managing authorities and support bodies. Designated Link Officers are assigned to each educational setting. These Officers help school leaders remain connected to the wider educational community. They deal with issues as they arise and signpost schools to resources and guidance.

Through a programme of work focussed on the continuity of learning, the whole education sector has ensured that appropriate action is taken to support the learning, progression and well-being of our children and young people.

Consulting widely with principals, our education partners have worked extremely hard to develop and deliver a wide range of resources to support distance learning. These have included:

- Online resources on C2k's Education Network Service.
- Guidance and advice for parents and carers on education websites.
- Support materials for parents of children attending pre-school, primary and special schools.
- Third party funded organisations providing curriculum support and learning opportunities for young people.

A recent survey of parents highlighted that almost 50% have used BBC resources to support home learning. I am pleased to report that my Department and CCEA are working with the BBC on further

resources which, alongside CCEA's Home Learning resources, may be helpful for schools, parents and carers.

This situation is not without its challenges. We do not know the final impact of the current crisis on children's safety, well-being and learning but, as I have outlined, we began from a strong starting point. It is important that we acknowledge the steps that have been taken across the education system, in all settings, to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning.

Working in this context, we are now looking strategically at how to support the system in the medium and longer term. Building on what exists and planning for a return to school over an extended period of time and with a blended learning approach.

Examinations

Mr Deputy Speaker, as you will be aware, on 16 April I announced my decision to suspend examinations for A levels, AS levels, and GCSEs. I made this decision after giving careful consideration to the full range of options and advice as well as feedback from key education stakeholders.

On 7 May, CCEA launched a consultation on the development of an alternative appeals mechanism for the summer 2020 awarding of GCSEs, AS and A levels. The consultation can be accessed through CCEA's website and today is the closing date for responses. My officials have been working with CCEA and colleagues across the UK to develop appropriate arrangements that are robust as well as fair.

I am sure I am not alone in wishing that we were not in this situation, and that exams could continue as normal. However, that is not possible. Whilst these arrangements are not and cannot be perfect, I believe they are the best solution available to us.

I would like to thank CCEA, ETI and others who engaged with the Department at short notice for the hard work that has gone into developing these arrangements.

Vocational Qualifications

My Department continues to work closely with the Department for the Economy to ensure that those taking vocational qualifications are not disadvantaged by the cancellation of scheduled exams and assessments. The Minister for the Economy recently announced her policy position in respect of vocational qualifications and I understand significant progress has already been made. Last week Essential Skills Awarding Organisations were issued with a CCEA directive to calculate an award for Essential Skills, guidance is already issuing to learning centres. The Minister also expects the ongoing work on wider vocational qualifications to be completed shortly.

Provision of IT hardware

I am conscious that some school pupils are more at risk of falling behind in their learning. In response, a scheme has been introduced to lend devices to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners moving into key transition years. Many schools have already lent equipment such as iPads and laptops to pupils for use at home. Teachers have made direct contact with pupils who have not logged onto the C2k network to ensure that they have access to IT equipment.

In addition, the Education Authority is engaging with schools in a process to lend digital devices to children from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, in particular those who may be considered vulnerable and those in examination year groups. Subject to the necessary approvals, I am intending to initiate a three stage process to the allocation of digital devices to children. Stage 1 –using existing school stock; Stage 2 – using 3,000 new laptops; Stage 3 – if needed, a further four to eight thousand additional devices will be bought.

This could provide up to 24,000 devices to be lent to pupils over the next few months.

I have agreed a range of criteria prioritising children in year groups 11, 13, 6 and 3 and who are also: eligible for Free School Meals; have Special Education Needs; are in the Newcomer target groups; Looked After Children and children who are considered vulnerable. Those pupils who are eligible for

Free School Meals in these year groups but do not meet the other criteria will be considered next for distribution. Finally, and subject to availability, pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals in other year groups will be considered on a similar basis.

Support for key workers

Members will be aware that schools are open, to provide supervised learning for those children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are key workers. Most recently there has been average daily attendance of around 1,500 vulnerable children and children of key workers at around 450 schools supported by approximately 2,000 teaching and non-teaching staff.

The ongoing development of cluster schools to ensure provision for children has been progressing well and there are currently 131 schools involved in 33 clusters across a large geographical spread.

The EA key worker request system had a total of 616 children needing to be placed and this has reduced to 42 as of the 18th of May.

Detailed guidance for schools is available on the Department's website. This includes guidance on how to manage social distancing in schools along with a video produced by the Public Health Agency on hygiene and social distancing in education settings.

I would like to re-iterate my thanks to the education leaders who are playing their part to support vulnerable children and children of key workers by opening their schools and working collaboratively with other schools at this unprecedented time.

Volunteer Scheme

Members will be aware that on 27 March I announced a Volunteering Scheme to assist in the response to COVID-19. To date there are in excess of 1000 Volunteers and the Volunteering Scheme has been paused. It has not been necessary to call on our volunteers, as our dedicated teaching and non-teaching staff have been coping well. The Department is planning ahead for the holiday period to ensure the availability of provision and could potentially avail of volunteers during the summer months, should the current situation remain.

Childcare Package

Coming now to Childcare, in relation to the £12 million emergency package for childcare provision for key workers, my Ministerial colleague Robin Swann gave an update on this at last week's Ad Hoc Committee so I won't repeat any of that today. Except to say that applications for the scheme are now being processed by the Business Services Organisation and a Reference Group comprising, education, health, childcare and parent representatives has been established to monitor progress.

My Department is continuing to fund non-statutory settings that are in receipt of pre-school education funding, and Bright Start School Age Childcare Funding in 2020-21. I have increased the 2020-21 Sure Start allocation to £27 million – an increase of 1.45 million – to allow services to be maintained at existing levels.

Coming to the Pathway Fund for 2020-21, demand for resources exceeds available supply and it has not been possible to fund all eligible applicants. To maintain key services for the most vulnerable children and minimise disruption for providers in the current exceptional circumstances I have made a bid to the COVID-19 Response Fund for additional Pathway resources. If successful, the bid would allow funding of all eligible 2020 - 21 Pathway projects.

Restarting the Education System

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are now beginning to look to the future.

There is a need to help secure the best possible educational future for all our children in what are extremely difficult circumstances. While there has been tremendous work done in remote learning over

the last two months, it is important that we begin to see recovery and a process of phased reopening of our schools.

This however must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure that it is done in a manner and in a timescale which is safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society. The pathway to recovery will follow the route outlined in the education section of the Executive Approach to Decision Making document. While all steps will ultimately be driven by the circumstances and the medical advice, I am aware of the need to give as much certainty to people as possible, so let me set out the likely timeframe as regards schools.

At present schools are closed to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children for supervised learning. This number has been slowly expanding since Easter and I would be keen to see more vulnerable children attending school and, similarly, should the Executive widen the definition of key workers this too can be accommodated, but neither of these actions will radically alter the pattern of children currently at school.

The phased reopening of schools will require engagement, preparation and implementation of actions in conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders. We have one chance to get this right and it cannot be done overnight. Therefore, other than the provisions for children of key workers and vulnerable children already mentioned, there will be no overall reopening of schools during the remainder of this academic year.

The Department is establishing a Restart Programme, which, working alongside a wide range of stakeholders, will put in place the detailed arrangements which will enable a safe phased reopening of schools. The work on this will be conducted during the remainder of this term and the summer. We must all use this time constructively and wisely.

Options will be developed to provide schemes during the summer that will make some provision for our children, particularly focusing on key worker children and vulnerable children - subject to medical guidance and compliance with social distancing. Working alongside other departments, we will explore what role the voluntary, community and private sectors can play in making some provision for our young people during the summer.

Subject to medical guidance and safety it would be my aim to see a phased reopening of schools, beginning with a limited provision for key cohort years in late August, followed by phased provision for all pupils at the beginning of September. This will not be a return to school as it was prior to COVID, but rather a new normal reflective of social distancing and a medically safe regime. For all pupils it will involve a schedule with a mixture of school attendance and remote learning at home.

Finally, in line with the Executive Strategy, contingent upon medical guidance and scientific evidence around susceptibility and transmission, consideration may be given to a full return for cohorts of younger pupils.

In closing, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I say this is the biggest public health crisis we have faced in living memory and the Executive's priority is to help keep people safe and to support those who have faced real hardship.

My Department and the wider education sector will continue to play a full part in the ongoing effort, whilst also focussing on the future, for when we return to some kind of normality.