



**STANDING COMMITTEE
OF
TYNWALD COURT
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**RECORTYS OIKOIL
BING VEAYN TINVAAL**

**PROCEEDINGS
DAALTYN**

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
EMERGENCY SCRUTINY**

HANSARD

Douglas, Friday, 12th June 2020

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Members Present:

Chairman: Hon. J P Watterson SHK

Mr L L Hooper

Ms J M Edge

Mrs J P Poole-Wilson

Mr C R Robertshaw

Clerk:

Mrs J Corkish

Assistant Clerks:

Miss F Gale

Mr S Wright

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Standing Committee of Tynwald on Public Accounts

Emergency Scrutiny (Education)

*The Committee met virtually at 11 a.m.
Proceedings were conducted and broadcast live
from the Legislative Council Chamber.*

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Procedural

The Chairman (Mr Speaker): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to this public meeting of the Public Accounts Committee. This is one of a series of meetings in which we are examining aspects of the response the state of emergency. I am Juan Watterson, Speaker of the House of
5 Keys and I am Chairman of the Committee. With me are Mr Lawrie Hooper MHK, Ms Julie Edge MHK, Mrs Jane Poole-Wilson MLC and Mr Chris Robertshaw MHK.

The topic today is Education in the Emergency Situation and we want to explore what has been delivered and the preparedness for returning to full education provision for all of the
10 Island's young people. We asked people to contact us with their thoughts on this topic and we received 35 submissions, some of which combined the views from several people. We would like to thank everyone who took the time to write to us and we have identified a number of common themes, many of which we will be asking about today.

EVIDENCE OF

**Hon. Alex Allinson MHK, Minister;
and Prof. Ronald Barr, Chief Officer,
Department of Education, Sport and Culture**

The Chairman: Before we continue I would just like to call on Ms Edge who would like to
15 make a short personal statement.

Ms Edge: Thank you, Chair.
I would just like to acknowledge that I am still an associate member of ASCL union.
Thank you.

Q185. The Chairman: Thank you very much.
I would like to welcome you, Minister, and Prof. Barr.
20 Minister, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture (Dr Allinson): Thank you very much,
25 Mr Speaker; and thank you very much to the PAC for inviting us along today.

30 On 3rd March I was given the honour of being made Minister for Education, Sport and Culture but unfortunately by 23rd March I had been responsible for closing all the schools. I do apologise for that. We are in a very strange time and it is quite odd that we are now 12 weeks to the day since the first case on the Isle of Man; and that 12 weeks seems like 12 years considering what we have had to go through.

I think it has been a real learning experience for the entire Island but particularly for the Education Department, and our teachers and our pupils and their families. It is something that has been quite brutal for some, particularly those that we have lost in our community. But it has also been a really good learning experience in other ways, particularly in terms of the resilience of the services and the way we react to issues like this, and the acceleration in terms of online teaching and remote learning.

35 So I very much welcome the PAC's Inquiry into how we have dealt with this because I think there are some really good lessons we can learn from this experience to actually take our service forward and become more responsive to pupils and their families.

40 Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The Chairman: Thank you, Minister.
Mrs Poole-Wilson.

45 **Q186. Mrs Poole-Wilson:** The question to Prof. Barr please.

When the virus first became an issue, what work streams were established and which teams led these?

50 **Prof. Barr:** With regard to how we handled the virus, or ... ?

Mrs Poole-Wilson: Correct.

55 **Prof. Barr:** We basically had just reconfigured the SLT group which continued to meet on a weekly basis and more often as necessary. That SLT group obviously includes Glenn Shimmin as Director of Finance, Geoff Moorcroft as Director of Education, Sue Mowle in terms of Inclusion and Safeguarding, Paul Bridson in Sports and Yvette Mellor in Corporate Services. And we also have Mary Slater our OHR business partner. So those meetings never stopped.

We also then had meetings with the cluster groups of the high schools and we also had a couple of meetings with secondary heads. So there was a series of meetings, many of which would have followed the normal pattern that obviously had to be done increasingly through the remote Teams process.

65 **Q187. Mrs Poole-Wilson:** Thank you.

I think the question was specifically about any work streams to address the Education Department's response. For example, on 20th March your Department statement said, 'The plans are already underway to provide for more education for pupils online and ensure they have access to these resources'.

70 So were these plans being drawn up by the Department? And how much of a priority was this?

Prof. Barr: Yes, they were being drawn up by the Department and obviously that sat with Geoff Moorcroft, as Director of Education, and the Education Improvement Team. They started working on these plans actually before the schools closed, and indeed I filtered an email to my SLT at the very beginning of March saying that this was going to be a problem for us in terms of the progression of this virus. Right at the very beginning of March I started to discuss this with my SLT and I am more than happy to share the initial email that I sent to my SLT, I think it was around 2nd March saying we will need to start thinking about how we are going to react to this.

Q188. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you.

80 And specifically in terms of any other work streams that you established to address the impact of the virus, can you tell us what those work streams were and how you prioritised them, please?

Prof. Barr: We also had a finance work stream, and Glenn can possibly tell you a little bit more about that in terms of how we were reacting to lack of income coming into the Department and how we were going to deal with that, and how we were going to deal with school meals. So there was a range of work streams that involved different officers and their own divisional staff across the Department that dealt with school meals, that dealt with finance, and that dealt with the learning; and also with individual schools' concerns as this process unfolded.

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Q189. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you.

I believe the Minister would like to add something at this point.

The Minister: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

95 Again, right at the start of the health emergency I think there was a lot of uncertainty about the way the Island was going to react in total. The first case in the United Kingdom was on 31st January, and by 28th February there was obviously evidence of person-to person-spread. And then we had our first case on 20th March.

100 On 16th March DESC sent out guidance to all teachers in terms of how to provide education remotely in the event of a school closure, and this was the start really of trying to plan ahead for remote teaching and remote education for those people would not have kept coming to school; but also at the same time we created the hub whereby we would consolidate those children who were seen as vulnerable at the time with various criteria, but also those children of key workers. In terms of the Cabinet Office, we did quite a lot of work on the basis of the UK model of key workers so that we could maintain essential services on the Island.

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So at the time there was a lot of movement around this but also dealing, as Ronald Barr has said, in terms of school meals and how we would use the estate properly, but also how we would redeploy staff and a huge number of teaching staff and support staff were redeployed into the health sector; and obviously also the NSC, when it closed, has now been used as a storage sector for the Department of Health and Social Care in terms of PPE.

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Thank you.

Prof. Barr: Can I just add to that, that obviously we also did a lot of work around free school meals and Chrissie Swales and Glenn Shimmin and others worked initially with schools in terms of planning for that and setting up the voucher scheme that we set up in terms of planning how we were going to feed children who were entitled to free school meals. There was also quite a lot of work that was done as a separate work stream around pre-schools with Chrissy Callaghan and colleagues in DHSC.

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Q190. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Okay, thank you very much.

120 Can I ask the Minister: in planning your response how did you interact with the Central Emergency Response Teams across Government?

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The Minister: Right at the start of the health emergency I was asked to join the National Strategy Group which at the time was sitting on a daily basis and working across Government in terms of obviously Education but also Health, DFE, Cabinet Office. And what we were trying to do there, was very much approach education from a health aspect – because obviously we were worried about the health of our pupils, staff and their families – but also looking at how the Education Service could support those pupils who needed to come into school, particularly in

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130 the units, those children with special educational needs who needed that support, but also to
support those essential workers who needed to go into Noble's to prepare it for the eventual
increase in cases that we started seeing in March.

135 So there was actually a very good central team-working effort, from my point of view, but
also Ronald Barr was seconded to sit on Gold Command which was meeting on a daily basis, and
the Chief Officers Group as well. So there was a huge amount of co-ordination between the
various Government Departments to create a co-ordinated response to the health emergency.

Q191. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you, Minister.
Has that changed over time, and how?

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The Minister: It has. I remained on the National Strategy Group on a daily basis for the first
10 days of the health emergency, and after that it was seen to be less important for me to sit on
those regular meetings and so I went back to being a CoMin member rather than on the NSG.
But certainly, in the initial phases when we were dealing with uncertainties around the health of
145 students and when we were dealing with reallocation of staff, I think it was absolutely right that
Education was at the forefront of the national response to the pandemic.

Q192. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you.

150 We have received feedback that lack of cross-Government co-ordination is impacting
families, particularly citing the Department for Enterprise and Treasury actively promoting
return to work leaving parents, particularly mums, being told by employers to return to work
with no provision for their children.

What is your response to that, please?

155 **The Minister:** I think that is a very valid criticism.

In terms of the overall planning, what we have been trying to do is work quite closely with
DFE, both at a Gold Command Chief Officer Group level but also at a Council of Ministers' level.
There have been some issues in terms of the rate of change, I think, the Department for
Enterprise has been quite keen on getting the various economic sectors open.

160 But in terms of the educational input we have been relying very much on the advice of the
Senior Clinician Group and also Public Health in terms of how we phased that, and this was
particularly evident in terms of pre-school nursery and childminders, that from a clinician point
of view there seemed to be some increased risks involved with very close contact with children
at the early stages, and so there was I think a reticence to open up child care particularly when it
was extremely hands-on. But that reticence was perhaps the delay of that provision for those
165 families who wanted to get back to work.

In terms of opening up the schools, we had similar issues in terms of the logistics of it, the
rate of change. During the Easter holidays we kept the hubs open to provide for education for
key workers and vulnerable children. We made the decision to close them, during what was the
170 TT half-term to enable some consolidation and an ability to have a bit of a breathing space, I
suppose really, for the Education Department and head teachers so that we could plan for the
return which will start on Monday.

175 So whilst there has been a co-ordinated approach perhaps the rate of change has been
slightly different because the logistics of opening up schools, particularly in terms of getting back
redeployed staff, can take a little bit of a while to arrange.

Prof. Barr: I think if I can just add something else there which is obviously Geoff Moorcroft
produced a roadmap based upon the return of year groups, which was based around our
judgement in terms of prioritising educational need in terms of the year groups and how we
180 would return them.

The other thing that I would say is that at Chief Officer Group there were regular discussions with Mark Lewin and other chief officers with myself, because we were also keen to represent the interests of children who were vulnerable. I think the Committee is right to see that clearly Treasury and the Department for Enterprise have a priority in terms of protecting the economy. We have a priority obviously to try and ensure the children's interests in terms of their education and those that are most vulnerable are also protected in that space. We gave head teachers very clear guidance that, as well as prioritising key workers, they were to prioritise where possible any children they felt were particularly vulnerable.

Q193. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you.

If I could move on, we have had a lot of feedback about the apparent disparity of provision between different schools and teachers. One comment being that education provision on a small island should be equitable, not a postcode lottery.

So can I ask Prof. Barr: what guidance has been issued by the Department to schools about appropriate learning support for different year groups?

Prof. Barr: Extensive guidance has been issued by the Department, sometimes on a daily basis. Geoff Moorcroft, the Director of Education, sent out a daily email updating head teachers in terms of what learning might be available, what things they should think about progressing and things that they could do within the schools. And that was, as I say, done on a daily basis.

The issue we have had around all of this, which perhaps the Committee may have realised, is that we are still dealing with a work-to-rule across all of Education in terms of teaching and some of the teaching unions. And so they have not been willing to engage with us in terms of setting up potentially new QA systems and other systems to monitor what would be online delivery; and certainly I am not going to tell you that, as Chief Executive, I am satisfied with the quality of online delivery.

I think there has been some excellent online delivery and I think there have been some areas which have not been to the standard we would have liked, but I am afraid sadly it has been partly mired in the industrial dispute and the non-co-operation that we have had from some teaching unions. And also you will appreciate this is a new type of learning and even in England the English government has not set out its standards by which OFSTED could judge that learning.

So it is something we are very keen to progress and we have been pushing out a lot of information to head teachers – some of them have picked that up and have utilised it in very innovative ways, and some not so much.

Q194. Mrs Poole-Wilson: Thank you. Just one more question for me.

I understand that schools do usually work autonomously with central Department support but, given the schools seem to have co-operated and collaborated around staffing the hub schools, was this not a situation where it would have worked for the Department to co-ordinate a central response co-opting teachers to work centrally to deliver both online learning and perhaps specified guidance for year groups?

Prof. Barr: The specified guidance for year groups and other things were actually pushed out to schools, and there has been a group that was led by Joel Smith in terms of IT and learning that has been in place for some time and so we also capitalised on that work and sent that out to schools. The issue we have had is that in asking schools to do things ... On a number of occasions they would say, 'Well, we're not prepared to do that because it is part of the ongoing industrial dispute that we have with you'.

So the Department has had to manage that pressure throughout this entire crisis. And so we have not had the kind of integrated approach that I think many to be fair in the teaching profession would have liked, and we would also have liked. But as I say, because of the ongoing dispute, we have been somewhat stymied in some of this.

The Chairman: Thank you.
Ms Edge.

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Q195. Ms Edge: Thank you, Chair. I would like to focus on communication throughout COVID. For the Minister: we have had reports from parents of mixed and confusing messages throughout, most recently the dates of the phased return. What has the Department been responsible for communicating, and what has been delegated?

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The Minister: Thank you for the question.

In terms of communication with parents, what the Department has been trying to do is to send out really clear messages in terms of recommencement dates through press statements and also through the press conferences. We have also been sending out regular updates to head teachers and asking them to send those on and communicate those to their parents.

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I am quite happy to pass over to Ronald Barr now, because from my understanding it is the head teachers who have the database for their parents rather than the Department.
Could you fill us in about that, Ronald?

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Prof. Barr: Yes, that would be correct, Minister.

Each individual school – and indeed Ms Edge probably knows this – is their own data controller, so they hold the datasets. So the Department does not have the ability to contact parents across the Island because the datasets are held by the individual head teachers in the individual schools. So what we have been doing is we have been communicating on a daily basis with the head teachers, and Geoff as I said would send out a daily email at the end of the day with links and other information.

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Geoff and I also convened a number of meetings virtually with the cluster groups, in other words the relevant high school and their feeder primary schools, and we had hour-long meetings with each cluster group on a range of occasions. There was at least three or four cycles of those meetings that took place. So we have pushed a lot of information out to head teachers but they have ultimately the ability to disseminate that information to parents. We do not.

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Q196. Ms Edge: Thank you.

And for Prof. Barr: there was new legislation in this direction that was issued with regard to data sharing. Did the Department not pick up on that?

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Prof. Barr: We are aware of the legislation around data sharing, but that was obviously between, as I recall, the different Government Departments. It did not extend to the individual schools and data sharing within schools. And so we were relying, as I say, on schools to say, you know your parents ... And, to be fair, some head teachers were willing to work with us on this; and again I am afraid it was one of those things where in some cases a head teacher said, 'Well, this falls within the industrial dispute and therefore we are not willing to do the full amount of information sharing that you would like'. So again I think that accounts for some of the variability of information.

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There was also, despite very clear messaging from the Department about when schools would open – so, for example, that all school sites would open on 15th and 16th June. One or two head teachers misrepresented that and apparently thought that their own schools would be open on 15th June, which of course was not the case. What we said was the sites would be open and then obviously key-worker children would return to their own schools across the Island on 17th.

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So there has been a bit of mixed messaging and I am aware that there have been some posts on social media and that has added to the confusion I think amongst some parents around all of this. Indeed we had to ask one or two head teachers to take posts down because what they had put out was inaccurate information and had not been authorised by the Department.

285 **Q197. Ms Edge:** So if you were aware of mixed messages, did the Department set up a monitoring system on how the continued communication was taking place with students and parents?

290 **Prof. Barr:** We are made aware of social media. We have somebody who monitors everything that goes on in social media. But clearly we work closely with Comms. We are also aware from some head teachers, and indeed from other sources, of people who had become aware of various posts that are available on social media and have been seen on social media. Obviously where we know that they are inaccurate we go to great lengths to make sure that those pieces of information are either corrected, or that is then taken down.

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Q198. Ms Edge: So have you got a record of what individual schools have done and what they have provided to parents and students during the crisis?

300 **Prof. Barr:** I do not have an individual record of each individual school in terms of what communication they have had with individual parents. What I can tell you is the information that we have disseminated to schools and what we asked them to then disseminate to parents. We did not have a mechanism to therefore then check about what actually was sent to parents.

305 **Q199. Ms Edge:** For the Minister: in a media briefing on 2nd May, you stated that schools volunteered to remain open during bank holidays. It has been suggested to us that in fact schools were not asked – that information from the Department was received by email on 2nd May, an hour before the briefing.

Does that surprise you, as Minister, that the schools only received that an hour before the briefing?

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The Minister: Well, again if I can come back to Ronald Barr, because the decision about staying open over Easter was made in conjunction with head teachers. If you would like to detail that, Ronald?

315 **Prof. Barr:** Yes, we had a meeting and we actually discussed this with regard to, as I recall both the Good Friday and the Easter Monday and indeed the May Day bank holidays, and those were referenced in the meetings that Geoff Moorcroft and I had with the head teachers. We said very clearly in those meetings that we were expecting, because of the state of emergency and because at that point we only had about 3% or 4% of children in school, that we would keep that going through the Easter holidays and the May Day bank holidays; and also because of the 800 teaching staff that we have, we had 200 who were shielding or who had underlying health conditions and therefore were not in a position to help in schools.

320 But the other 600 staff, effectively, we split them into three-week rotations and so on that basis staff were prepared to work through those holiday periods because clearly they had one week in school and then two weeks when they were not in school. When they were not in school there was an expectation that staff would be getting on with online learning materials and doing other preparatory work. But there was also a clear guidance from us that people should take some leave. And so if you had a three-week rotation, yes you might well be working through one of the Easter weeks, but you would then in return be getting another week off during that three-week rotation period. And I have to say that three-week rotation period certainly from our point of view – and certainly we never got any negative feedback around this – has actually worked very well throughout the entire crisis.

325 **Q200. Ms Edge:** Okay, and just with regard to co-operation and obviously communication during this. Did the unions not suspend their action during the crisis?

330 Are you stating that they continued their action during the crisis?

Prof. Barr: Yes. Not all the unions: ASCL, which represents primarily senior leaders in high schools, suspended everything except one element of their action. So they suspended the bulk of their work to rule, but other unions did not do so.

340 NEU, of course, has not been in dispute with us but NAHT and NAS/UWT continued with their work to rule.

Q201. Ms Edge: And for the Minister: can the Minister just advise who actually took the decision to close during the TT period?

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The Minister: The TT half-term that was scheduled was discussed in the Senior Management Group, and our inclusion safeguarding advice was that actually keeping closed during the past two weeks would be beneficial particularly for staff but also for families and children to try and get them back into a more normal routine as we reopen the schools from 15th June.

350 So that decision was made at the Senior Management Team. It was then discussed with head teachers and also with the teaching unions at the JNC shortly beforehand.

The Chairman: Ms Edge, final question?

355 **Q202. Ms Edge:** Thank you.

Obviously the schools will be back from Monday in a more operational way, shall I say. How, as a Department, are you going to gather information and actually be fully aware of any progress, and for students and parents any of the issues that have been raised – and obviously as the Committee we have received submissions. How are you going to gather this information and ensure that the process is picked up on it for any future emergency situation?

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The Minister: Well, if I could just add that we have obviously been monitoring the number of children and the number of students coming in to all of the facilities and kept a close eye on that.

365 I suppose what you are talking about is identifying individual educational needs. Throughout the health emergency teachers have been reaching out to children at home trying to identify those needs, particularly in terms of those children who were not vulnerable prior to the restrictions of movement being brought in, but that may have become vulnerable during this very difficult period for our Island.

370 I think you are quite right that there will be a degree of work when children come back into their classes to identify those deficits in their education, but also any wellbeing problems that have developed. The Inclusion and Safeguarding Team have worked quite closely to give teachers guidance in terms of what they should be looking out for, how they can reintegrate those children back into their schools who have lost out on eight weeks of schooling, and how they can then deal with any issues that arise.

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We have also been working in terms of keying up the educational psychology support and the listening service as well. So we are quite aware that as children come back to their schools whilst their educational needs are paramount, also we need to look after their wellbeing needs as well.

In terms of your question I think you also wanted to actually know about the operational mechanism for gathering this data, so perhaps if I can pass over to Ronald to detail how we will collect some of that data?

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Prof. Barr: That will be dependent upon the schools.

And, just to be clear, obviously the school sites are all open on 15th June and we have got enhanced cleaning. We have had to source another 20 additional full-time cleaners and five additional full-time caretakers. We have also spent I think about £70,000 on new cleaning stations, and all of that has got to get up and running and operationalised on 15th and 16th which is why all the school sites are not open. But on 17th June all the school sites will be

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390 receiving children and that will then be the start of the process within schools, for them to start
then making a determination about where young people are with their learning, where the
children are, and how have the more vulnerable children been getting on. There is a big piece of
work that I know many in schools are keen to get started on in terms of hopefully getting four
full weeks at least with children before what would be the start of the summer holidays.

395 Then there is a broader question about what additional support we might manage to put in
over the summer to help children who have obviously struggled during this period.

So we are looking forward to working constructively with teachers. They will get to know very
quickly, I think, where their children are once they get the children back into classes; and
obviously we have recognised that our educational psychologists and other people involved in
the listening service and other groups that we have I suspect are going to be extremely busy.
400 And indeed, conversations I have had with Glenn on the finance side is looking at how we might
have to plan and prepare for additional resource in that area which I think is almost inevitable in
terms of the mental pressures and strains that families have been under.

The Chairman: We will move on now to look more at the online learning provision.
405 I call on Mr Hooper.

Q203. Mr Hooper: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Members of the Committee have mentioned we had quite a lot of evidence submitted and
obviously the Minister and Ronald Barr have not had chance to see this evidence, but it speaks
410 to some of the questions here about supporting and provision of remote learning.

So just to give a very brief flavour of what we have received: one of the statements we
received in was actually very supportive of work that was put in place commenting, 'The school
set work, and kept in touch with children having video messages, online chats with teachers' and
that actually there had been a lot of check-ins on that basis.

415 But on the flip side of it one of the statements we had in was asking us to note 'the extreme
concerns raised by the limited provision of quality, structured teacher-led sessions and
assignments, and a lack of contact with class teachers'.

In this context of the disparity that has been highlighted, obviously you mentioned in your
opening remarks that the Department provided schools with significant guidance in this,
420 including a 10-page guide that was issued at the start of the crisis. I would like to ask you: do you
think the document and the guidance was fit for purpose? And then, what else has followed
since then?

Prof. Barr: I would say that the guidance was fit for purpose. Obviously as you will know,
425 Mr Hooper, this has been a moveable feast. It is new territory in terms of we have always had
some blended learning, certainly in higher education, but to scale it up in this way for schools
has been quite a challenge. So it is continually something I think that is being refined, based
around the experiences that we are having in terms of the feedback we are getting.

430 And then, as I say, going back to my earlier point which is that the English government has
yet to provide us with definitive standards by which this quality of learning can be measured.
We need to very quickly get into that space, and one of the things that we could do is to move
this forward; and if we can resolve this industrial dispute then obviously we can make more
rapid progress in doing that.

435 **Q204. Mr Hooper:** Okay, thanks for that.

In your remarks earlier you said that only 3% to 4% of children were attending school,
actually physically attending the hub sites. So that means around about 96% of children were at
home, which means this remote learning was absolutely vital for the overwhelming majority of
children on the Isle of Man.

440 Given that the Department issued this central guidance which you feel was fit for purpose
and was adequate, how did you ensure the schools and teachers were actually following this
guidance?

Prof. Barr: We were not in a position to do that because of course the schools are not
445 co-operating with us in terms of the schools inspection and review processes, and that would
also reach in terms of what delivery we are doing remotely.

So not only do we not have any guidelines from England about what the standards would be,
but we have the issue of the fact that on the Island we had two teaching unions who were not
going to co-operate with us with regard to the SSRE process, which is the process by which Geoff
450 Moorcroft and his team gauge the quality of learning in schools.

Q205. Mr Hooper: Okay, so given the challenges that you have already identified then in
ensuring a level playing field as it were, and actually I think we appreciate that the level playing
field is not in place for a wide variety of reasons, can you advise what support was provided by
455 the Department where schools or teachers were having difficulty or struggling to provide this
kind of remote or online learning?

Prof. Barr: We had Joel Smith who is the key adviser in this area working with schools, and
where we got individual communities where schools came back to us we did our very best to
460 support them if there were issues around the technology platform. So, for example, if there
were issues around GTS, liaising very closely with Graham Kinrade and other officers in that area
to ensure that we were getting the sort of platform to be robust.

We did have issues around obviously both the use of Teams and the use of Zoom and
obviously we were concerned at the beginning of this crisis because there were some very
465 publicised areas in the use of Zoom where in place like Singapore it was hacked, and all kinds of
images and things appeared in children's homes and virtual classes.

So we have tried very hard to resolve those issues with GTS, and worked with schools and
provided them with the sort of guidance and assurance that we need to make sure that those
platforms are working as effectively as we can make them work. But again that has been
470 something that has been an evolving process as the crisis has evolved – these issues have come
up and we have tried to address them.

Q206. Mr Hooper: Okay, just a question really for the Minister more than for Ronald.

Given that Ronald has just expressed there have been some difficulties trying to bring the
475 unions on board with some kind of QA process, can the Minister please advise the Committee
actually what steps were taken to try and engage teachers and unions with developing a new QA
process, or an appropriate QA process when it comes to remote learning? And why the
Department seems to be relying on waiting for the UK or England specifically to produce
guidance, when generally we do not follow the UK in terms of their education system?
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The Minister: Absolutely. And again right at the start of this health emergency I think there
was a disparity in terms of which schools had taken on online learning, online resources and
which had not, and that became ... I think a lot of these inequalities and disparities have been
amplified by the restrictions brought in by the health emergency.

485 In terms of quality assurance of online –

Q207. The Chairman: Minister, I am terribly sorry.

You are coming across rather muffled, Minister, if you could just –

490 **The Minister:** I do apologise, I will move a little bit closer. Is that better?

The Chairman: No. Further away is usually the thing for muffled. Further away and louder!

The Minister: Okay, is that any better, Mr Speaker?

495 **The Chairman:** Marginally, yes.

The Minister: Okay, I do apologise, it was working before.

So just to backtrack, there were obvious differences between the ways individual schools had taken up remote learning before the health emergency was declared. And what we have gone through has amplified these differences between different schools.

500 In terms of quality assurance of online resources, that is incredibly difficult at the best of times. The Chief Inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, has recently said that even Ofsted find it impossible to actually guarantee the quality of online resources. But during a health emergency when we were socially distancing and when teachers are teaching from home to pupils at home it makes it practically impossible to do, apart from setting clear guidance and some aspirational ideas about what should be provided. Now, as we move forward, and with the passage of the new Education Bill, I hope we can try to familiarise ourselves with the issues, but also draw up some clear guidelines of the minimum requirements which we can then move forward with. But at the moment that has been extremely difficult to provide.

510 I think that Ofsted have excellent examples of remote learning but whether that is online or physical, it is often ...

The Chairman: I am terribly sorry, but you are going back into muffled again.

Perhaps I can ask Mr Hooper to move on to his next question and we will start again?

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Q208. Mr Hooper: Yes, thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for that answer, I think I get the direction of where he was trying to go there.

I mean, he talks about setting some aspirations in the guidance. So turning to the guidance itself then, the guidance does reference a number of very specific challenges that are identified to delivering remote learning. Specifically it highlights: unclear expectations of pupils and parents; a lack of accommodation for pupils without access; and a variety of disparate digital tools that could cause confusion.

520 Could the Minister or the Chief Executive please comment or advise on how the Department tried to address these challenges?

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The Minister: If you would like to answer that Ronald, because bearing in mind my sound is not particularly great ... ?

Prof. Barr: Obviously we have been looking across other jurisdictions, not just in the UK, about examples of best practice and how these things could be tackled. As I have said earlier this morning, Geoff put out a very, very full, not an email, almost like a newsletter with links and advice and guidance that his team were picking up in terms of how to address those issues. So we were continually signposting schools in the direction of: 'You might want to look at the following link'; 'You might want to look at the following learning resources'; 'You might want to now look at the following paper that has been published in the following journal' – to try and help them in terms of providing some guidance and support around all of this.

530 **Q209. Mr Hooper:** Thanks for that.

I think that what I am trying to get at is the guidance sets out a number of very clear challenges and it also sets out very clearly actually a number of things that the parents might be able to expect. So it talks about video conferences and check-ins with pupils. We have actually had a number of submissions in evidence that clearly seems to show this was not the case, this

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was not happening; and I am sure the Department was getting similar feedback and the schools were getting similar feedback as well over the last 12 weeks of the closure.

545 So what I am asking really is: what specific actions were taken and what specific guidance was issued? What did the Department do to try and ensure schools could try and address some of these key challenges that were set out in that initial set of guidance?

Prof. Barr: Well, like I said, we directed the head teachers to: ‘These are things that you should be doing’ and ‘These are the sort of ideas of best practice’ and ‘These are the things that you could be doing’ and ‘These are things you should be doing’.

550 But again, I come back to the fact that during the industrial dispute we had no mechanism to actually follow up in terms of quality assurance because the teaching unions are not working with us in terms of the school review processes, and that is mired in the industrial dispute over pay; and although ASCL withdrew their objections to a lot of this and NEU were not involved with this, NAHT of course represents the vast bulk of primary head teachers and school leaders in primary schools and they were not willing to work with us in any of this.

Q210. Mr Hooper: Thanks for that.

560 I think I have got a lot more questions on this, but I can feel my time is about to run out so before it does I would just like to touch on a very different topic, in terms of school leavers.

We have had a number of submissions in respect of concerns parents are raising, about what will be happening now with those children who are on their way out of the education system, leaving GCSEs, or A-level university students who will go into university for the first time? Obviously, all of this will have been significantly impacted by the coronavirus crisis.

565 Can the Minister or the Chief Exec comment on what support has been put in place and what work is under way to try to support these children and young people that are leaving the education system, which at this point in time may have a very significant effect on their future prospects?

570 **Prof. Barr:** Can I just say quickly on that, that we have done a lot of work with UCM around this in terms of ensuring that there is support for higher education students. Jo Pretty and her team up at the College in terms of not just planning for the area you have described, Mr Hooper, but also for potentially university students who will not be able to return full time to their universities in the autumn; and for UCM to think about ways in which they can support the students who are about to go to university or indeed who are at university and may not be able to return to university in September or October of this year.

580 So there has been quite a bit of work done around this. There has also been a lot of work done by Jan Gimbert and by their colleagues in DfE in terms of what we are going to do to support young people and indeed the wider workforce in terms of retraining. We suspect that the economic crisis which we have not really referenced this morning is going to lead to potentially significant long-term unemployment and obviously in education we need to be prepared for this.

585 And certainly Jo Pretty and Jan Gimbert have done a lot of work with this and have engaged with Mark Lewin, my opposite number in DfE, and other officers in terms of producing something which we can then bring forward perhaps under the revised Programme for Government.

The Chairman: Right, I am afraid, Mr Hooper, that is the end of your time.
590 Mr Robertshaw.

Mr Robertshaw: Thank you, Mr Chairman. Can I just double check my volume level? I do not want to be accused of shouting at the Minister or Ronald.

The Chairman: It is the volume we would expect from you, Mr Robertshaw.

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Q211. Mr Robertshaw: Thank you.

I have got four questions, Mr Chairman.

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My first question is the obvious one. You have gone from the concept of two-metre distancing in schools to then one-metre distancing a few days ago to what I suppose could be called 'normal' behaviour with regard to yesterday's announcements by the Chief Minister. So a simple question: how soon can the schools all be fully open?

The Minister: If I can answer that? Can I just check my volume? Can you hear me, Mr Robertshaw?

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Mr Robertshaw: Yes I can. Thank you.

The Minister: Lovely, okay, I just wanted to check on that.

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I think you are quite right, even with one-metre social distancing it becomes incredibly hard to provide education for children. And that is not just us; I think that has been seen around the world. So that is partly because of the actual architecture of our schools, partly because of class sizes and partly because of capacity. We have also got to remember that we need the staff there as well to teach – it is not just about buildings.

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So the Chief Minister's statement last night in terms of removing the social distancing restrictions is pivotal to getting all children back to school. What we have been clear about throughout the health emergency, though, is given people's fears and given children's health concerns and their parents' health concerns, we would not make it obligatory that they had to return to school; but we hope over the next week we can get all the schools reopened, all those key workers and those children who are currently in the hubs back to their schools, and then from 22nd June we will be opening it up to years 2, 6, 10 and 12.

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We will be arranging to contact all head teachers on Monday morning so we can discuss helping accelerate the return of all pupils to the Island's schools and we are also working with DOI in terms of the bus system to supply the transport – but also in terms of the catering as well – for when they are at school to see they get there. So I am confident that we can get all those children who *want* to come back to school, back to school within the next two to three weeks.

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Q212. Mr Robertshaw: Thank you, Minister.

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My next question is frankly, blunt, but it is intended to be so for good reason, so no offence is intended. This is looking back to what was, for a minute or two.

Two-metre distancing only ever, as the CEO has said, gave access to 25% of children to schools. That would have been left to all the teachers to end up being fully employed in the schools and yet at the same time they would have been trying to cope with distance learning for the rest, which effectively was the majority and 75% of the children.

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So my point to you is that the two-metre concept was always, *always* going to be inoperable or unworkable. Did the Department ever bluntly tell CoMin very clearly that this concept, this directive simply would not work? Or did you just choose to follow a CoMin directive on this two-metre requirement?

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The Minister: Mr Robertshaw, I do not take that as blunt at all, I think it is a very good question. In the roadmap document that was issued after the consultation with teachers, we actually acknowledged that with the two-metre rule we would not be able to provide education. We optimistically thought 50%, but actually following on from that when teachers went round with tape measures and measured up their individual classrooms it became quite clear that it was going to be even less than that.

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At the start of the health emergency there were issues with an awful lot of fear, and when we looked at other jurisdictions when they did open their schools sometimes only 40% or 50% of parents felt secure enough to send their children back to schools. That was another part of the equation as well.

650 But I think you are quite right that there was always going to be the need for remote learning and we were also relying on those staff who could not come back into a school environment because of their own health concerns, or concerns of their families, who we would then rely upon to provide distance learning. I think there is some comparison to be made with King William's College and the way they opted for online learning relatively quickly. I have talked to
655 their principal and they spent two weeks trying to set up Microsoft Teams and found it extremely challenging. All of their classes were closed, none of their teachers were in school, they were all providing online resources and their average class size was 14 or 15. And even they found it difficult.

660 So I think that shows the problems of moving in a very short time space from a physical education environment to a remote one.

Q213. Mr Robertshaw: Thank you very much, Minister.

665 So from looking back on what might have been, to looking forward to what hopefully will be: overall, the Isle of Man finds itself in a good position. Between now and when the borders open we obviously found a clear opportunity to form a plan to respond to the possibility of future sporadic re-emergence of the virus. We now know a great deal more about how to respond to the virus than we did at the start. It was a shock for us all.

670 We know when we *cannot* return to emergency powers should there be a reoccurrence, but how long do you think it will be before your Department has produced a plan that everybody understands – teachers, parents, children – in the event of a sporadic return of the virus?

Thank you.

675 **The Minister:** Again, I think that is a very valid question because we do not know what is going to be happening over the next year, there are so many variables in terms of whether we get a second wave, or whether the virus burns itself out and how we respond as an Island to that.

680 The Council of Ministers are currently working on a clear plan of escalating restrictions should we need them in the future and what I have asked them to do is actually look at the evidence about schools, because as we have gone through this period there has been more and more research done on the contribution schools play towards the transmission of the virus within the community, and also the risk of children continuing to go to school during a viral pandemic when it is COVID-19.

685 I would like to think that, should we get another outbreak or another surge in the number of cases, we can respond to it in a much more strategic way than we did back in March. We could perhaps close one or two schools in a particular locality if they had an outbreak of coronavirus, or we could actually make the pragmatic move of keeping those schools open, given the fact that the risk to those pupils – as long as the staff worked – would be relatively small; but obviously the knock-on effects for their parents and the wider economy and their overall mental health and wellbeing would be affected by school closures.

690 So I think what I am saying is, yes, we need to develop our online resources to keep those children who cannot come back to school for the foreseeable future because of underlying health problems, but we also need to have a slightly more strategic and surgical way of dealing with any outbreaks that may occur until the time that we can eradicate the virus.

695 **Q214. Mr Robertshaw:** Thank you, Minister, that is very clear. Thank you.

And my final question, which I think you have just touched on before, so forgive me. We obviously want to see all children back to school as quickly as possible. But it does remain your

policy does it not, that if a parent chooses not to return their child to school before September that that will be classed as permissible with regard to the Department's position?

700 Is that correct?

The Minister: That is, and I think that the choice, the ability for a parent to choose when to send their child back during very uncertain times is very important. However, there is an obligation on the Department to deal with those concerns if it can but to support that parent and their family with the education for their child. We are not just saying, 'You don't have to come in; we will ignore you'. We are saying, 'You don't have to come in; we will deal with your fears, we will deal with your concerns. And if you still don't want to come in we will support you and we will support your child's education'.

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710 Which is why even when we get the majority of children back to school, we will still need to further develop, refine and improve the remote learning experience that they should expect.

Mr Robertshaw: Thank you.

Can I now hand back to the Chairman, please?

715 **Q215. The Chairman:** Thank you very much.

So just to take us into the final section, then, this is the real tension between the Department for Enterprise and the Treasury on the one hand prioritising the economic return and your Department is focused very much on vulnerable children. The parents have kind of been left hanging in the middle, haven't they, whilst the pressure on the one hand is to get people back to work and on the other hand your priority is to look after the most vulnerable children?

720 That has left quite a gap, hasn't it?

The Minister: I can answer that.

725 I do not think there has been a huge amount of tension between Treasury, DfE and Education. I think, as I have said, we have been working together with an overall strategy for dealing with the health emergency. So at no point have I come under any pressure from other Departments to bring children back to school, or staff back to school, when it was not safe to do so.

730 I think what there has been is a real need to give clear guidance for schools to try to make sure that the educational provision is uniform across the Island at a time when it has been very difficult to meet, but it has been easy to share ideas online. But I think what we have experienced in Tynwald and even today has shown that online communication, with all the best will in the world and good platforms, can be problematic and can lead to misunderstandings.

735 **Q216. The Chairman:** So has the advice, Minister, been that it has been safe to go back to work, but not to go back to school?

The Minister: Well, the various different companies have responded in various different ways on an overall risk assessment which is exactly the same as we have done in schools. We have looked at the individual schools and we have seen where it is safe to bring pupils back, and then planned for that.

740 I know various companies have done exactly the same and they have managed to get the majority of their people working from home when that is more appropriate, with the right support. And we have been trying to make sure that the majority of students who have been studying from home get that right support from their head teachers.

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Q217. The Chairman: You mentioned it is going to take another two to three weeks to get all children back to school. What is holding this up?

750 **The Minister:** Part of that is that we have always said, as a Department, we would support parents, pupils and teachers and other school staff with a gradual phased return to normality. What we have said is that from Monday the schools will open and the staff will come back, and they will need to take apart some of the social distancing restrictions that they set up when we were looking at a two or then a one-metre guideline. They will need to dismantle those and get the schools ready to return all the pupils that are currently in education to their own local school, and then make sure that we can provide for all the other pupils over the following weeks.

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760 The things that we need now to do, given the announcement from the Chief Minister yesterday, is work with other Departments such as DOI to provide the transport services we need, and to make sure we have got the staff we need – and Ronald Barr has already had a chat about the number of extra cleaners and caretakers we have brought in to ensure that our schools are safe, not only now but running into the future as we deal with the threat of coronavirus.

765 **Q218. The Chairman:** So what we are saying is that we cannot reopen the schools and offer that normality to everyone who wishes to take it up because we are not quite sure how much cleaning it takes and whether we have got enough teachers?

The Minister: Not at all, Mr Speaker.

770 What I am saying is that from Monday morning we will not be opening all the schools. We will be gradually reintegrating children into those schools but we will do it in a controlled, orderly manner so that we get it right, so that we have classes for them to go into where they feel safe and they can actually benefit from the education they receive. *(Interjection by Prof. Barr)*

775 **Q219. The Chairman:** I am still not sure what the reason is for taking two to three weeks to achieve that.

Prof. Barr: Can I just come in there, Mr Speaker?

780 Obviously we did risk assessments for every single school site on the Island. That was a huge piece of work and obviously we have these cleaning stations and we had to get additional cleaning staff. All of that has got to be operationalised on the Monday and Tuesday.

Some of these school sites obviously have been closed for 10 weeks or more. So getting them up, operationalised and running – and then obviously on 17th June all the sites are open.

785 Now, the information I have had from head teachers is that we were expecting about 20% of children back on Wednesday 17th because there were a lot of key workers who did not actually send their kids to the hub school, but now that the local schools are open they would send their children there. And of course with all the teachers back in school, *their* kids would also be back in the system. So we were anticipating about 20% of children back on 17th, which is quite a jump from 6% which is what we had on the Friday before Practice Week.

790 In reality we now think that there might be as many as 40% of children back on 17th, obviously because of the Chief Minister's announcement. And indeed four head teachers contacted me yesterday saying they had about 50% of children who were wanting to come back into their school. So I anticipate that we will have significant numbers of children in school on 17th, 18th and 19th; and then, as the Minister has said, we will have another significant number back in school on 22nd. And indeed we will talk to heads on Monday about whether we can actually get *all* of the year groups back.

800 **Q220. The Chairman:** Yes, I think the Chief Minister is definitely talking about the language of 'We are now at the new domestic normal'. But what we are hearing from the Department is that normal is still two to three weeks away.

Prof. Barr: Well, I will be astonished if we do not have children back in schools quicker than three weeks. I think all children will be back before that.

805 **The Minister:** Mr Speaker, 'normal' is next week; 'full normal' will be the week after. But as the Department has always said we will work with parents, we will work with teachers and we will work with everyone to do this in an orderly fashion so it is sustainable and works.

810 **Q221. The Chairman:** And if I could just pick up on where Mr Hooper left off in terms of online learning. King William's College has run a virtual school since Easter, I understand, and we are still not there several weeks later.
Is that really good enough? Are we nearly there?

815 **The Minister:** I have already tried to explain why comparisons with King William's College are not particularly applicable to the rest of the Education Service on the Isle of Man. They have done a very good job. They have set up a system that works for them. What we have been trying to do is enable head teachers to set up a system that works for *them* and their pupils. And we are dealing with some pupils who may not have online access.

820 There is also still a lot of controversy about whether online classes and online lessons educationally are the right things to do. But what I think we certainly need is more of a structure around remote learning so that parents know what to expect and know who to go to if their expectations are not met.

Certainly I have been talking to several head teachers who during this process have dramatically improved the services that they give to their pupils and to their families.

825 **Q222. The Chairman:** But would you give an assurance, Minister, that if people do turn up to school and they are in those year groups they will not be turned away?

830 **The Minister:** That is why we are having a gradual return, so that that does not happen. We need to ensure that we have the staff, the facilities and everything else that we need to run schools.

Closing them has been incredibly easy; opening them up is much harder. But by having a gradual return to full-time education over the next week or so we can guarantee that pupils will not be turned away from the door.

835 **Q223. The Chairman:** Thank you.

I think that brings us to time; but Minister, Prof. Barr thank you both very much for joining us today. And whilst I know we have been asking some perhaps testing questions, I would hate for that to take away from the huge amount of work that has been put in by Department staff, teachers, assistants, caretakers and the wider education community in making the best of a bad situation and I am sure that you, too, would also echo those sentiments.

845 **The Minister:** Mr Speaker, can I just thank you and the PAC for your questions. They have not been blunt, they have been pointed and they have been extremely relevant. But can I also say I apologise to those pupils and those parents who feel that they have not received what they expected.

Throughout this difficult period we have been working very closely with teachers, with the teaching unions and with parents to try to get us through this. We are now in a much better place than we were. However, we need to carry on with that co-operation and that communication.

850 But I think one thing that this says to all of us is that by working together we can achieve far more than working individually. So whilst there are criticisms of the Department that I will

accept, I also am in a Department with some fantastic people who work with us right the way through our schools from caterers and cleaners to teachers.

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

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The Chairman: Thank you, Minister.

And with that, the Committee will now sit in private.

The Committee sat in private at 12.03 p.m.