

Witness Name: Ronnie Armour
Statement No.: M7/DENI/01
Exhibits:
Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RONNIE ARMOUR (acting Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education Northern Ireland)

I, Ronnie Armour, will say as follows: -

A. Introduction to the Department of Education

1. I am the Acting Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education (the Department) in Northern Ireland, I have been in post since 2 December 2004, covering for Dr Mark Browne who was in post from the 1 March 2021. His predecessor, Derek Baker, retired on 27 November 2020, prior to Dr Browne's appointment. During the period of 28 November 2020 to 28 February 2021 the post was covered by Lianne Patterson carrying out the required duties and acting as Accounting Officer to comply with regulatory requirements. The Rule 9 request was issued to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education and in preparing this statement I have access to all required documentation in order ensure compliance to this request.
2. The Department is one of nine Northern Ireland Departments and is a body corporate.
3. Education is a transferred matter in Northern Ireland, (that is to say a devolved matter), it being neither an excepted nor reserved matter within the meaning of section 4 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The statutory functions (powers and duties) of the Department are contained throughout various pieces of Northern Ireland legislation. In Northern Ireland responsibility for Further and Higher Education sits with the Department for the Economy.

4. The Minister has overall political responsibility and accountability for the Department's statutory functions. The Minister sets the strategic policy and resources framework for the Department.
5. The Department is managed by a Departmental Board, made up of senior staff and two independent Board members under the leadership of the Permanent Secretary, which meets to discuss strategic issues and to plan, prioritise and report on progress. Whilst issues were discussed at Departmental Board, decisions were made by the Minister on the advice of departmental officials or advice from relevant experts i.e. Chief Medical Officer (CMO) / Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA).
6. The Department has a wide and complex range of functions, impacting on all areas of a child's wellbeing, having overall responsibility and accountability for the quality of education in schools, youth organisations and those offered by early years providers. It also leads on the development of the Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. The various settings included encompass 355,787 children in educational settings –

Type of School	No. Of Schools
Voluntary and Private Preschools	350
Nursery Schools	93
Primary Schools	794
Secondary	126
Grammar	66
Special	39

7. Education in Northern Ireland has statutory functions exercised routinely by the Department in conjunction with its strategic public sector partners and delivery partners, listed below: -
 - **Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)**; a non-statutory executive non-departmental public body (NDPB), established to encourage and promote the strategic development of, and provide guidance and advice to, the Irish medium education sector.
 - **Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)**; a statutory executive NDPB, responsible for the employment of teachers in Catholic maintained schools, effective planning and management of these schools and for a number of other, mainly advisory, functions.

- **Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)**; a statutory executive NDPB, established on 1 April 1994. It is responsible for keeping under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment for grant aided schools and colleges of further education and for undertaking statutory consultation on proposals relating to legislation. It also advises the Department on matters concerned with the curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications and accrediting qualifications; conducting and moderating examinations and assessments, ensuring that standards are recognised as comparable to standards of examinations and assessments conducted by other bodies or authorities exercising similar functions in the United Kingdom.
- **Education Authority (EA)**; a statutory executive NDPB responsible for securing adequate provision for primary and secondary education and for recreational, social, physical, cultural and youth service activities for grant-aided schools and other grant-aided educational establishments.
- **General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI)**; a statutory executive NDPB for the teaching profession and is dedicated to enhancing the status of teaching and promoting the highest standards of professional conduct and practice.
- **Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA)**; a non-statutory executive NDPB (an agreed area of co-operation within the North / South Ministerial Council) opened in March 2007 to deliver key educational services on an all-island basis for children with some of the most complex forms of autism. It is an 'area of cooperation' between the Department and the Irish Department of Education & Skills (DES) (Renamed as Department of Education 22 October 2020), with funding provided on a 50/50 basis and under the oversight of the North/ South Ministerial Council.
- **Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)**; a non-statutory executive NDPB, established to encourage and promote integrated education and provide guidance and advice to schools in that sector, or considering transforming to integrated status.
- **Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI)**; a statutory executive NDPB, established under the Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Following the creation of the EA as a regional body, responsibility for regional youth services funding and support transferred from the YCNI to the EA on 1 April 2016.

LIST OF KEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (NI) OFFICIALS DURING THE PERIOD COVERED BY RULE 9

- **Permanent Secretary** – Derek Baker (DB - PS) (retired 27 November 2020)
- **Interim Permanent Secretary** - Lianne Patterson (30 November 2020 to 28 February 2021)
- **Permanent Secretary** – Dr Mark Browne (MB – PS) (appointed 1 March 2021)

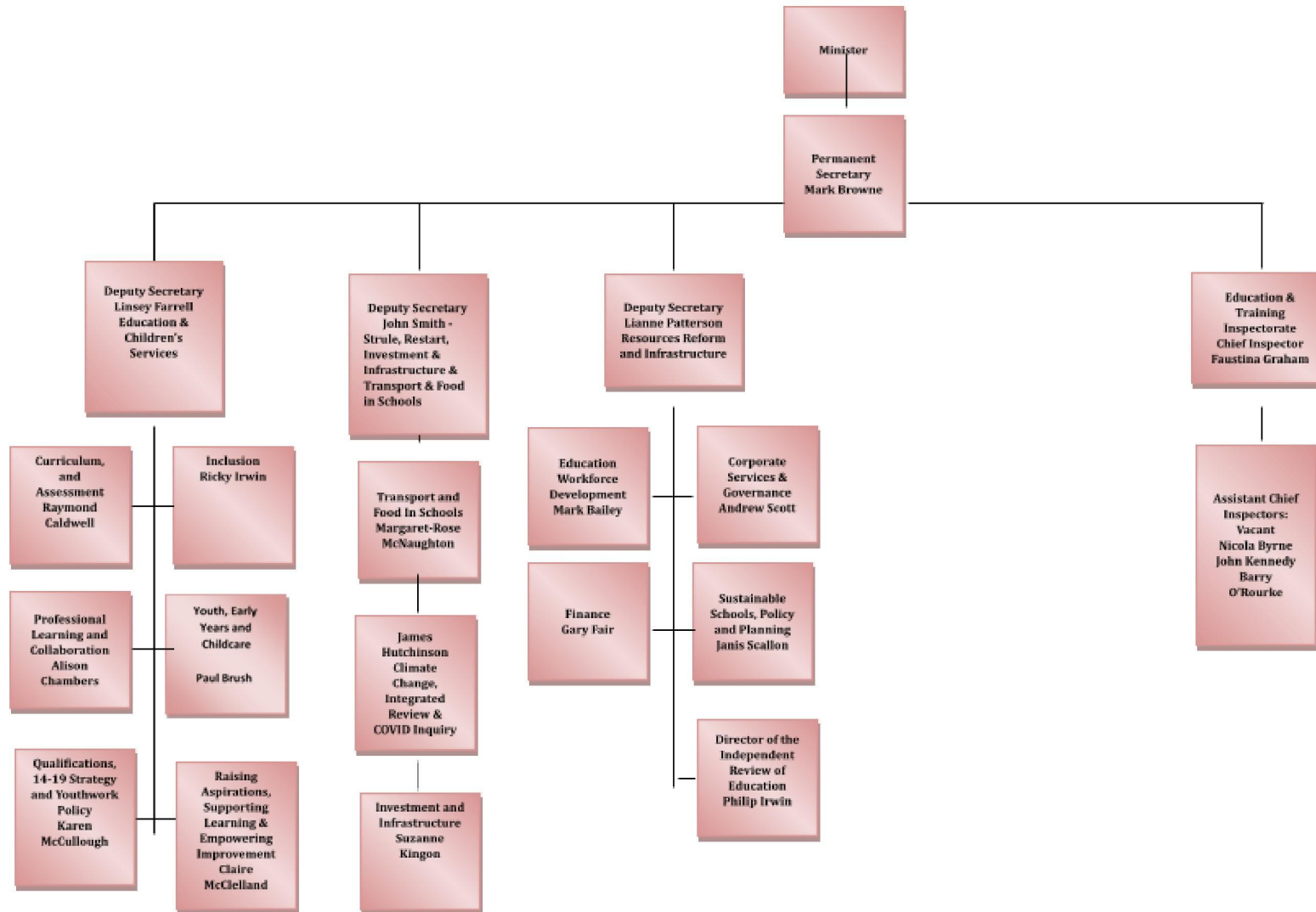
Departmental Top Management Group:

- **Deputy Secretary** responsible for **Education and Children Services**: Fiona Hepper (retired 8 August 2021) / Linsey Farrell (appointed 4 October 2021);
- **Deputy Secretary** responsible for **Strule, Restart, Investment & Infrastructure, & Food in Schools** (lead on Covid-19 Response from summer 2020): John Smith.
- **Deputy Secretary** responsible for **Resources and Reform**: Lianne Patterson.
- **Chief Inspector** for the **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)**: Faustina Graham.

Departmental Senior Leadership Team

Director	Area of Responsibility
Janis Scallon	Sustainable Schools Policy & Planning
Mark Bailey	Education Workforce Development
Gary Fair	Finance
Suzanne Kingon	Investment & Infrastructure
Andrew Scott	Corporate Services & Governance
Ricky Irwin	Inclusion
James Hutchinson	Climate Change, Integrated Review & Covid-19 Inquiry
Ray Caldwell	Curriculum
Paul Brush	Early Years, Childcare and Children and Young People's Strategy
Margaret-Rose McNaughton	Transport & Food in Schools
Karen McCullough	Qualifications, 14-19 Strategy and Youth Work policy
Alison Chambers	Professional Learning and Collaboration
Claire McClelland	Raising Aspirations, Supporting Learning & Empowering Improvement
Philip Irwin	Secretariat for the Independent Review of Education
Barry O'Rourke (Interim)	Assistant Chief Inspector
John Kennedy (Interim)	Assistant Chief Inspector
Vacant	Assistant Chief Inspector
Nicola Byrne (Interim)	Assistant Chief Inspector

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION - SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE REPORTING STRUCTURE



DEPARTMENTAL OBJECTIVES

8. The key priorities and objectives of the Department fall under the following eight strategic priorities and are driven by the Department's policies:

- **Make learning accessible to all** - the Department gives all children and young people access to pre-school, school and youth education provision.
- **Improve the quality of learning for our children & young people** - the Department ensures that education provision is of a high quality and supports learning and progression.
- **Look after our children & young people** - the Department supports and promotes positive physical and emotional health and wellbeing and supports high-quality affordable childcare.
- **Support those who need more help with learning** - working with health & education partners, the Department delivers high quality services for children & young people, including those with Special Educational Needs.
- **Improve the learning environment** - the Department promotes equality of opportunity, respect for others, good relations and inclusivity and the Department provides modern, sustainable educational settings which are fit-for-purpose and facilitate shared learning.
- **Tackle disadvantage and underachievement** - the Department improves developmental and learning outcomes for all children & young people, with a particular focus on those who are underachieving, at risk of underachieving, or disadvantaged.
- **Support and develop our education workforce** - the Department develops and deploys teachers, other education professionals and support staff effectively, promoting high standards and leadership and improving health & wellbeing.
- **Effectively manage, review and transform our education system** - the Department delivers our corporate governance and finance responsibilities while seeking to improve efficiency, increase sustainability and introduce new ways of learning.

GROUPS, DIRECTORATES AND KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

LINSEY FARRELL, DEPUTY SECRETARY – EDUCATION AND CHILDREN’S SERVICES GROUP

Directorates

- Curriculum (Raymond Caldwell)
- Inclusion (Ricky Irwin)
- Professional Learning and Collaboration (Alison Chambers)
- Early Years, Childcare and Children and Young People’s Strategy (Paul Brush)
- Qualifications, 14-19 Strategy and Youth Work Policy (Karen McCullough)
- Raising Aspirations, Supporting Learning, Empowering Improvement (Claire McClelland)

LIANNE PATTERSON, DEPUTY SECRETARY – RESOURCES, REFORM AND INFRASTRUCTURE GROUP

Directorates

- Sustainable Schools Policy and Planning Directorate (Janis Scallan)
- Corporate Services and Governance (Andrew Scott)
- Education Workforce (Mark Bailey)
- Finance and Analytical Services (Gary Fair)
- Internal Audit (Tracey McCavigan)
- Independent Review of Education (Philip Irwin)

JOHN SMITH, DEPUTY SECRETARY - INFRASTRUCTURE, TRANSPORT, FOOD AND RECOVERY GROUP

Directorates

- Strule Shared Education Campus Programme Directorate
- Transport and Food in Schools Directorate (Margaret Rose McNaughton)
- Investment and Infrastructure (Dr Suzanne Kingon)
- Climate Change, Integrated Review and Covid-19 Inquiry (James Hutchinson)

FAUSTINA GRAHAM, CHIEF INSPECTOR

Directorate

- Education and Training Inspectorate Directorate

LINSEY FARRELL, DEPUTY SECRETARY – EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES GROUP - DIRECTORATE RESPONSIBILITIES

CURRICULUM DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Raymond Caldwell Director

Key Responsibilities

- The aim of the work of the Curriculum, Directorate (CD) is to support the effective delivery of the Northern Ireland curriculum in our schools.
- The Directorate leads policy development and provides ongoing advice in relation to the statutory curriculum, and associated policy development; school starting age; academic selection at age eleven; and the review of statutory assessment arrangements.
- The Directorate manages a range of delivery partners (Third Party Organisations) to further enhance the delivery of the curriculum in our schools, including organisations such as Sentinus, Business in the Community, Young Enterprise, Music for Youth, the Bready and District Ulster Scots Development Association (BDUSDA) and the Sports Programme delivered by Irish Football Association (IFA) and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).
- It also co-sponsors the CCEA and oversees the Exceptional Circumstances Body for post-primary admissions (ECB).

INCLUSION DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Ricky Irwin Director

Key Responsibilities

- The Directorate has responsibility for developing and maintaining policies that address a range of barriers to learning for children who have or may have special educational needs (SEN), disability and complex needs. The Directorate also carries policy oversight and sponsorship responsibility for the Middletown Centre for Autism, a Non-Departmental Public Body which operates on a north/south basis. During Covid-19 the Directorate led on the response for vulnerable children.
- The Directorate is made up of two teams namely, the Special Education Team which focuses on the current legislation and policy implementation; and the Special Education Inclusion Review Team which is focused on the delivery of the New SEND Framework – Regulations and revised Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of SEN.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND COLLABORATION DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Alison Chambers

Director

Key Responsibilities

The aim of the directorate is to contribute to the Department's vision through encouraging and supporting the development of collaborative practice in the integrated and Irish-medium sectors; initial teacher education and the strategy for teacher professional learning ("Learning Leaders"); and shared education and community relations. The directorate is responsible for sponsorship and oversight of three of the Department's NDPBs: GTCNI; NICIE; and CnaG.

- **Shared Education Community Relations Team:** Responsible for Community Relations, Equality and Diversity policy and Shared Education (SE), including the current SE PEACE IV projects; development of the PEACE PLUS 'Shared Learning Together' programme; and the development and oversight of the Mainstreaming SE strategy.
- **The Irish Medium and Integrated Education Team:** Sponsor team for the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and for Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG). Responsible for policy guidance on transformation to integrated status "Integration Works" - currently under review to reflect the requirements of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the passage of time since the last publication in 2017.
- **GTCNI Interim Sponsorship Team:** Sponsor team for GTCNI, responsible for governance and development of a Bill to establish a new professional body for the teaching profession.
- **Teacher Education Team:** Responsible for the Learning Leaders Strategy, setting Initial Teacher Education (ITE) intakes, the ITE Working Group, and funding for the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) and the Gaeltacht Experience (for the Irish medium ITE (PGCE) programme).

EARLY YEARS, CHILDCARE AND CHILDREN and YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRATEGY DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Paul Brush

Director

Key Responsibilities

- The focus of this directorate is to provide policy advice to the Minister and to develop, implement and evaluate agreed policies and associated programmes in the areas of early childhood education, childcare provision designed to complement formal learning. It also has responsibility for coordinating the Executive Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030, the Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and Executive input to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- The directorate, in collaboration with the Department of Health (DoH) / Public Health Agency (PHA) and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), leads on the development of the data source for one of the proposed draft Programme for Government indicators, '% of children at appropriate stage of development in their immediate pre-school year', one of the measurement indicators for the outcome 'Our children and young people have the best start in life'. Subject to agreement with The Executive Office (TEO), it is proposed that the data on children's development collected during the 3+ Review is the data source. Discussions are ongoing with statisticians and DoH in relation to this measure.

The directorate has 5 teams as listed below:

- **Childcare Unit:** responsible for developing the Executive's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and managing the current Bright Start School Age Grant Scheme.
- **Pre-school Team:** responsible for pre-school education provided through statutory and non-statutory providers participating in the universal Pre-school Education Programme.
- **Interventions Programmes Team:** responsible for early years interventions targeted at supporting children at risk of educational underachievement: the Sure Start Programme, the Pathway Fund and Toybox Project (Travellers). Also responsible for core funding to the early years sector.

- **Learning to Learn Team:** responsible for the 'Learning to Learn' early years education and learning policy framework and the 'Getting Ready to Learn' programme.
- **Children's and Young People's Strategy Team:** responsible for coordinating, monitoring and reporting on the Executive's Children's and Young People's Strategy, leading on UNCRC issues, taking forward a project to facilitate the participation of young people in decision making and play policy.

QUALIFICATIONS, 14-19 STRATEGY AND YOUTH WORK POLICY

Key Staff

Karen McCullough Director

Responsibilities

Qualifications Team

- General qualifications policy including the oversight of annual qualifications delivery processes and liaison with officials in the other UK jurisdictions on qualifications-related issues.
- Policy in relation to the post-Covid-19 managed return to more normal examinations and awarding arrangements.
- Working with Department for the Economy (DfE) on access to vocational qualifications, review of Essential Skills and the impact of Vocational Qualifications reforms in England on the NI qualifications market.
- General Qualifications Reform – Undertake a review of general qualifications at KS4, specifically approaches to assessment to address Department commitments within the ‘A Fair Start’ report and the 14-19 Framework. This will include an analysis of the alternative awarding arrangements implemented during the pandemic, and qualifications reform work in the other UK jurisdictions, to help inform the development of proposals for reform.
- Ongoing engagement with the Irish Medium (IM) sector to ensure that IM learners continue to have access to a suitable range of qualifications delivered in Irish.
- Approval of qualifications to be taught in NI schools, working with CCEA and the EA on maintenance of the qualifications database – the NIEFQAN file.

14-19 Strategy Team

- 14-19 Strategy Team has responsibility for Area Learning Communities (ALCs) and the Entitlement Framework (EF) under which all post primary schools must provide pupils with access to a minimum of 21 courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16. Funding

of £2.9m is allocated to support delivery of the EF and is split across school collaboration, ALCs and EA administrative support.

- 14-19 Strategy Team has responsibility for the policy and delivery of careers education in schools. The careers system in NI is the responsibility of both the Department and DfE. The Department has responsibility for the policy and delivery of careers education in schools while DfE has responsibility for the policy and delivery of an all-age careers guidance service delivered by suitably qualified careers advisers.
- 14-19 Strategy Team works collaboratively with the 14-19 Framework Implementation Team in DfE to take forward agreed tasks from the Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training – A Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision publication.

Youth Work Policy Team

- Youth Work Policy team has responsibility for Youth Work Policy, management of the youth budget (excluding Youth Capital but including Planned Intervention and TBUC Camps); Fresh Start – Tackling Paramilitarism Executive Action Plan (Youth led interventions); Peace Plus (Youth); North South Education & Training Standards Committee; Sponsorship of YCNI; and Youth Honours.

RAISING ASPIRATION, SUPPORTING LEARNING, EMPOWERING IMPROVEMENT DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Claire McClelland Director

Key Responsibilities

- The aim of the Directorate is, as the name suggests, to raise aspiration and achievement for all learners, support their learning throughout their educational journey and empower schools, communities, families and children to work together to improve education, health and social outcomes. The Directorate is responsible for a range of programmes including –
 - Emotional Health and Wellbeing
 - Use of Targeting Social Need
 - Extended Schools
 - Engage Programme
 - Pupil Attendance
 - Period Dignity
 - Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime programme in specific locations
 - Neighbourhood Renewal
 - West Belfast Sharing the Learning
 - Full-Service Schools (North and West Belfast)
 - North Belfast Primary Principal's Support Programme
 - Community Use of Schools
 - A nationwide parental engagement advertising campaign
 - Oversight and delivery of the report "A Fair Start"
 - Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan.

School Improvement Team

- School Improvement Team (SIT) has policy responsibility for school improvement policy, whereby the Department has set out the qualities of a good school (in the policy document *Every School a Good School*), which informs the inspection framework, and every inspection by the ETI is followed up by a requirement to act

upon the findings. A significant portion of the team's work involves close liaison with the Education Authority (EA), The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to ensure a cohesive approach to school improvement, including the follow-up process for all school inspection reports and oversight of school development planning.

- It has been agreed that departmental officials should commence an End-to-End Review of School Improvement. This will provide an opportunity to fundamentally consider the Department policy in relation to school improvement, an opportunity to refresh the focus on raising standards and most critically ensure alignment of a range of key policy areas to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people.
- SIT is also responsible for managing the implementation and dissemination of the international benchmarking studies; *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) and *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS).

Pupil Support Team

Pupil Support Team holds policy responsibility for:

- **Safeguarding & Child Protection**, providing wide-ranging advice and guidance to schools and other settings through Circular 2017/04 "Safeguarding & Child Protection in Schools" and overseeing the implementation of Operation Encompass in Northern Ireland along with a range of complementary areas.
- **Pupil Emotional Health & Wellbeing** which includes the implementation of the joint Departmental and DoH 'Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework'. This framework seeks to ensure children & young people are empowered to understand and manage their wellbeing; any additional needs are identified early with appropriate support provided, all with the aim of reducing the numbers requiring specialist intervention from mental health services.
- **Children Looked After** which includes the implementation of the joint Departmental and DoH strategy 'A Life Deserved 'Caring' for Children & Young People in Northern

Ireland' and overseeing the establishment of an evidence-based support service for Children Looked After through the Education Authority.

Additional Educational Needs Team

Holds policy responsibility for:

- Nurture provision.
- Newcomer pupils.
- Traveller pupils.
- Roma pupils.
- Asylum seekers and refugee children including those living in contingency accommodation.
- Children of Services Personnel.
- The Armed Forces Covenant.
- The Vulnerable Persons' Relocation Scheme (VPRS).
- The Homes for Ukraine Scheme.
- Anti-Bullying including implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016.
- Restraint and seclusion in educational settings including a review.
- Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) including a review of arrangements.
- Exceptional Teaching Arrangements (ETA).
- School Aged Mothers Programme.
- Pupil behaviour.
- Pupil Suspensions and Expulsions including a review of arrangements.
- Education of young offenders.
- Review of Regional Services at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and Lakewood Special School.
- Young carers.

Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team

- Reporting upon the use of Targeting Social Need funding, Extended Schools, the Engage Programme, Pupil Attendance, Period Dignity, Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime programme in specific locations, Neighbourhood Renewal, West Belfast Sharing the Learning, Full Service Schools (North and West Belfast), North Belfast Primary Principal's Support Programme, Community Use of Schools, a nationwide parental engagement advertising campaign, oversight and delivery of

the report “A Fair Start”, contribution to the Executive’s cross-cutting Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan.

**LIANNE PATTERSON, DEPUTY SECRETARY - RESOURCES, REFORM AND
INFRASTRUCTURE GROUP - DIRECTORATE RESPONSIBILITIES**

SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS POLICY AND PLANNING DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Janis Scallon Director

Key Responsibilities

Area Planning Teams (APPTs)

- Three of the four directorate Area Planning Teams (that is Area Planning Policy Teams - APPT) support the implementation of Schools of the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools (Sustainable Schools Policy - SSP) through the development of the Area Planning process, support structures and governance arrangements.
- The Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP) aims to ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their educational needs in a school that is educationally and financially viable and takes account of the expressed preference of parents for a diverse system of education. Area Planning is about identifying future education needs and developing solutions to meet those needs on an area basis.
- The planning of education provision is a matter for the EA and CCMS, supported by the sectoral body representatives (NICIE, CnaG, GBA, CSSC, CSTS and TRC).
- A significant feature of the work of the APPTs is analysis and provision of advice on published Development Proposals (the mechanism by which significant changes to education provision are implemented). DPs follow a statutory process requiring a decision by the Department (typically the Minister) and many are complex and contentious in nature, with a number challenged through the Judicial Review process.
- The work of the Area Planning Development (APD) Team extends across mainstream primary and post-primary and SEN provisions. It focuses on the identification of barriers and development of solutions (including the development

and undertaking of pilot exercises) to facilitate and support the implementation of the SSP through a more agile and responsive Area Planning process.

School Admissions Team

- School Admissions Team (SAT) sets admissions and enrolment numbers annually for primary and post-primary schools. It also oversees the EA operation of the primary school admissions and post-primary transfer processes.
- SAT is also responsible for policy development relating to admissions and enrolment processes and providing advice as appropriate to schools, parents and the EA; making determinations on temporary variation requests from schools to vary their approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers (for one year) to admit named children; and processing admissions complaints received from parents who are unable to get their children admitted to schools that have places available.

Shared Education Campuses Team

- The Shared Education Campuses Team (SECT) are responsible for supporting 4 SEC projects that are currently ongoing / in planning. Each project involves one Controlled School and one Catholic Maintained school coming together in a shared campus arrangement. The programme is delivered under the Together: Building a United Community Strategy (a NI Executive Strategy).

CORPORATE SERVICES AND GOVERNANCE DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Andrew Scott

Director

Key Responsibilities

- The **School Governance Team (SGT)** is responsible for policy on school governance, the appointment of school governors, approving school schemes of management and the registration of independent schools. The team is also progressing a review of school governance.
- The **Sectoral Bodies Support Team (SBST)** implements agreed procedures to administer and monitor grant support for three publicly funded organisations: the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS), the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and the Governing Bodies Association (GBA). All were set up/funded for specific purposes with the approval of former Ministers. All are subject to review and possible recommendations by the panel of the Independent Review of Education.
- The **Education Governance Team (EGT)** has oversight responsibilities for business planning, governance, accountability and assurance issues between the Department and its NDPBs. It provides assurances regarding the effectiveness of risk management, including management of the Corporate Risk Register and for Departmental corporate and business planning; oversees the Department's contribution to and performance against Programme for Government outcomes; and oversees Ministerial public appointments.
- The **Information Management Team (IMT)** promotes information assurance, legislative compliance and information/records management best practice through advice, guidance, policies and procedures.
- The **Private Office** is responsible for providing support to the Minister, facilitating decision making by the Minister and the Senior Management team; and ensuring those decisions are underpinned by good quality and timely advice.
- The **Departmental Business Services Team (DBST)** has responsibility for the management of the Department's staff salary budget and carries out an HR liaison

role in relation to matters such as workforce planning and vacancy management. DBST provides Secretariat to the Department's Board and Staff Engagement Forum and coordinates on department-wide issues and international matters including British Council. The team also provides a range of corporate services to support the operation of Rathgael House such as accommodation, facilities management, health & safety and security for the premises, staff and visitors. DBST also maintains the Department's Business Continuity and Emergency Response plans and is responsible for ensuring Departmental adherence to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act: Equality Duties.

- The **Press Office** is part of the Executive Information Service and provides core media services including strategic communication support and advice to the Minister and senior officials.
- The team provides a full range of media services for the Education Minister, the department, and senior officials. The Press Office works to ensure that key departmental messages are communicated through effective processes, across multiple platforms and in direct interaction with the media.
- Press Office manage all aspects of Ministerial media activity including supporting Minister at events and visits; managing media and photographic/video services to the Minister; overseeing the preparation of news releases, lines to take and other internal and external written communications; responding to media inquiries; media monitoring; briefing journalists and managing relationships with the media; managing and arranging press conferences, radio and TV interviews, and media coverage of important events, announcements and visits. The team also manages the Department's internet, staff intranet and social media communication.

EDUCATION WORKFORCE DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Mark Bailey Director

Key Responsibilities

- Policy responsibility for workforce issues affecting the education workforce.
- Ascertaining if pay and conditions of service are appropriate to maintain an able and committed education workforce.
- Consultation with Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC) which comprises the 5 recognised teachers' unions on teachers' pay, terms, conditions and workforce issues through Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) structures.
- Supporting EA who consult with the recognised education support staff unions on pay, terms, conditions and workforce issues through Joint Negotiating Council (JNC) structures for non-teaching staff.
- Processing pay remit business cases for education sector staff in line with the NI Executive's public sector pay policy.
- Payroll Team located in Waterside House Londonderry, provides an outsourced facility processing teachers' salary payments, which amount to nearly £800m per annum on behalf of and under instruction from the employers, the EA, the CCMS and schools in the GMI and Irish Medium education sectors. Voluntary Grammar Schools (VGS) run their own payroll.
- Pension Team located in Waterside House with responsibility for the policy and administration of the NI Teachers' Pension Scheme (NITPS) comprising 44,500 active or deferred members and approximately 25,000 former teachers receiving pension benefits.
- Lead on a number of major projects including a replacement teacher's pension system and nine workforce reviews to address teacher concerns about workload and accountability and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system.

FINANCE AND ANALYTICAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Gary Fair Director

Key Responsibilities

- The role of the Finance Directorate is to manage the Department's Resource Budget (c£2.3bn), in line with Departmental priorities and draft PfG targets, to ensure propriety, regularity and value for money. The Directorate is responsible for securing funding, allocating resources, monitoring expenditure and reporting results.

Budgeting Team

- Oversight of the overall Education budget, including the setting and monitoring of the in-year budget and assessing future years budgetary requirements on an ongoing basis and in accordance with Department of Finance (DoF) guidelines.
- Preparation of Main Estimates, Spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account, including associated briefing for both the Department and TSS Estimates.
- Determining and reporting the Department's and NDPB Annually Managed Expenditure (AME) requirements to DoF.
- Completion of annual Provisional and Final outturn, monthly and Forecast Outturn requirements to DoF.
- Providing advice and guidance on the allocation, monitoring and management of the GAE/GPE budget.
- Providing associated briefings in respect of the above and advice and guidance on budgeting/public expenditure issues.

Financial Monitoring Team

- Allocating Resource budgets to EA, CCEA, CCMS and YCNI.
- Review and approval of Budget Plans of the above bodies.
- Monitoring of all in-year allocations to these bodies throughout the year.
- Monitoring Resource expenditure against budget in the above bodies and any related business plan targets of these bodies.
- Updating and publishing the Common Funding Scheme.
- Running the Common Funding Formula to determine school budgets.

- Providing budgeting advice in respect of all of the Department's NDPBs and all Schools.

Financial Reporting Team

- Production of the Department's Annual Report and Accounts.
 - Department's Core Accounts.
 - Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) Annual Statements.
 - Miscellaneous Trust and Endowment Scheme Accounts.
 - Whole of Government Accounts.
 - Consolidated Accounts under Review of Financial Process.
- Encourage, support and promote effective financial governance and financial accountability across The Department and its NDPBs.
- Delivering the Department's Retained Finance Function including the management of service provided by Account NI and promoting optimum use of the finance system.
- Provide relevant accounting and finance advice and guidance.
- Effective monitoring of cash.

Education Technology and Procurement Team

- Provide procurement advice and guidance for the Department's and NDPBs and, in conjunction with DoF's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD), contribute to the accountability and governance of procurement.
- Provide an oversight role of the portfolio of Education Technology across the Department and its ALBs, monitoring and reporting on the delivery status of high-risk Education ICT Projects and Programmes.
- Ensuring the effective functioning of the Department's ICT Programme Board to support effective governance and accountability in relation to the delivery of Education Technology programmes and projects.
- Ensuring the effective functioning of the Department's Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee.

Statistics and Research Team

- Provision of analysis, research, monitoring and evaluation which inform policy making within the Department.
- Production of Official and National Statistics publications to provide a robust evidence base.
- Management of external research and surveys (e.g. Young Life and Times Survey and international studies (PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS) and other ad-hoc policy relevant research).
- Facilitate data sharing with external organisations where justified taking account of the Digital Economy Act 2017 and the Data Protection Act 2018 and to support research projects through the Administrative Data Research NI.

Economic Advisory Unit

- Disseminate DoF Better Business Cases NI/Five Case Model Guidance to the Department and ALBs.
- Advise and support towards the development and approval of value for money business cases for all the Department and ALB activity - both above and below delegated limits.
- Advise and support towards policy, programme and project evaluations and disseminating the results.
- Provide specific Better Business Cases templates for the use of the Department and ALBs.
- Undertake annual test drill and compliance exercises.

INTERNAL AUDIT

- To deliver a professional, high quality Internal Audit service to enhance delivery of education.
- The evaluation of potential fraud, irregularity or whistleblowing allegations to determine appropriate action and address system weaknesses.
- To provide advice and guidance to management to improve internal controls.

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION

Key staff

Philip Irwin Director

Key responsibilities

- As part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Agreement it was agreed that *“The Executive will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system”*.
- Terms of Reference for the Independent Review were agreed by the Executive on 10 December and published on 15 December 2020 RA/043 - INQ000235262. The ToR was subsequently revised due to comments from DfE Minister and reissued on 3 February 2021.
- The panel was appointed in September 2021 and began work at the beginning of October 2021.
- A Secretariat Team has been established within the Department to support the work of the Review Panel. The Secretariat’s responsibilities include.
 - Preparation and agreement of Terms of Reference (ToR).
 - Recruitment of Review Panel.
 - Supporting the delivery of the Review workplan.
 - Ensuring Review milestones are delivered on time.
 - Managing the Panel’s engagement with stakeholders.
 - Promotion of the Review within and outside the Department.
 - Financial management and development of business cases.
 - Supporting the Panel’s research agenda.
 - Ensuring delivery against the ToR.

JOHN SMITH, DEPUTY SECRETARY - INFRASTRUCTURE, TRANSPORT, FOOD AND RECOVERY GROUP - DIRECTORATE RESPONSIBILITIES

STRULE SHARED EDUCATION CAMPUS (SSEC) PROGRAMME

Key Staff

John Smith Deputy Secretary & SSEC SRO

Key Responsibilities

- The SSEC Programme Directorate is the Contracting Authority responsible for the direct delivery of the SSEC Programme which is one of the Department's top priorities and a long-standing Executive priority.
- The Strule Programme involves significant capital investment into the region's post-primary and special education sectors for the construction of six new schools and associated shared education facilities.
- The Programme is well underway and significant investment (£49m) has already been made with work carried out across many of the individual projects. Phase 1 has been completed and Arvalee Special School opened in 2016.
- The Programme, which is intended to deliver a range of educational, societal and community benefits, includes a number of projects and workstreams taking forward the following key activities.
 - Construction of the remaining five schools and shared facilities.
 - Development of the education model for the Campus.
 - Development of arrangements for the ownership, governance, funding and management of the Campus; and
 - Considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing sites following relocation.
- As set out in the 'Other Topical Issues' section above, following a Ministerial Direction to progress to the next phase of construction, the Main Works Contract Invitation to Tender concluded on 26 September 2022 with one tender received. The Main Works contract is now in tender negotiation phase with the bidder.

TRANSPORT AND FOOD IN SCHOOLS DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Margaret Rose McNaughton Director

Key Responsibilities

The Transport and Food in Schools Directorate, working in cooperation with Departments, agencies and stakeholders, is responsible for:

- Policy responsibility for free school meals; boarding and clothing allowances (school uniform grants) including a review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals.
- Support and coordination of the Department's contribution to DfC led Anti-poverty Strategy and Food poverty Action Plan. This includes work on a long-term sustainable solution to help children in poverty during school holiday periods.
- Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs).
- Food in schools' policy and school meals policy, including nutritional standards for school food.
- Elective Home Education.
- The Department's School uniform guidance and policy development work on reducing the costs of school uniforms.
- Policy responsibility for home to school transport.

INVESTMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

Suzanne Kingon Director

Key Responsibilities

Investment and Infrastructure Directorate (IID) is responsible for management of the Department's capital budget and delivery of the Department's capital investment plan (excluding the Strule Shared Education Campus Programme). The key responsibilities are:

- Management and delivery of the key capital programmes:
 - Major works.
 - School Enhancement Programme.
 - Fresh Start Programme.
 - Minor works schemes.
 - Management of voluntary youth capital projects.
- Monitoring the capital budgetary position, including capital receipts
- Asset Management
 - Department's Asset Management Plan.
 - Oversight of the existing Public Private Partnership contracts; and
 - Monitoring of the resource budget for schools' maintenance.
- Grant claw-back from surplus sites in non-controlled sectors

CLIMATE CHANGE, INTEGRATED REVIEW AND COVID-19 INQUIRY DIRECTORATE

Key Staff

James Hutchinson

Director

Key Responsibilities

Climate Change and Covid-19 Inquiry Team

- Responsibility for the creation and monitoring of the Department's impact assessments and input into the Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2023-2027 in accordance with the NICS statutory obligations. Coordinating actions with ALBs to meet the targets set by the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and develop workable solutions within budgetary restraints to allow the reduction of carbon through the curriculum and development of the school estate and transport across the educational sector. Reviewing current policies and seeking alternative solutions to deliver against the first carbon budget.
- Overseeing a series of sectoral plans covering Energy, Transport, Infrastructure, Business & Industrial Processes, Buildings, Waste Management, Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry, Fisheries and Public Sector.
- The Department has identified four of the sectors (Transport, Buildings, Waste Management and Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry) which it can contribute to and encompasses current policies with significant input from the Education Authority and other ALBs to Department-led initiatives.
- The commencement of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry legislatively requires the Department and its ALBs to provide written and/or oral evidence to the Public Inquiry. The Covid-19 Inquiry Team was established within the Department to ensure the Department's contribution is effectively coordinated with suitable corporate governance structures in place.
- While the Department's response to Covid-19 continues to evolve to becoming "business as usual", the team retains aspects of oversight going forward in terms of the provision of any necessary central guidance to educational settings based upon public health advice.

Integrated Education Act Implementation Team

- The Integrated Education Act Implementation Team leads effective implementation of the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. This is a short-term task and finish project focused on ensuring Departmental compliance with the Act.

- Initially work has focused on developing, agreeing and setting up governance and project management structures to engage education partners and seeking clarification from DSO on a range of matters within the legislation.

FAUSTINA GRAHAM, CHIEF INSPECTOR - EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE - DIRECTORATE RESPONSIBILITIES

Key Staff

Faustina Graham	Chief Inspector
John Kennedy	Assistant Chief Inspector (Further Education, Work-based learning, DAERA, CJI, Home Office and Youth)
Vacant	Assistant Chief Inspector (Quality and Improvement, Special Educational Needs, Shared Education, Education Other Than At School, Independent schools and Initial Teacher Education)
Nicola Byrne	Assistant Chief Inspector (Early Years, Primary, Post-primary and Safeguarding)
Barry O'Rourke	Assistant Chief Inspector (Empowering Improvement Programme and Development of Inspection)

Key Responsibilities

- The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is a unitary inspectorate, which provides an independent inspection and policy advice service. Whilst ETI is formally a part of the Department, it also provides inspection services for the DfE and other commissioning Departments, assists them in the discharge of their responsibilities and provides policy advice to the Ministers and officials in these Departments.
- The functions are laid out in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (Article 102). Essentially, the Department has the power to appoint inspectors to inspect schools and to give directions to remedy any matter referred to in an inspection report. Inspection is a key part of work to raise standards, as it provides a professional evaluation of an organisation's strengths and areas for improvement, which, if addressed effectively, will improve the quality of its provision and the outcomes achieved for learners. Inspection is also an important part of arrangements for the accountability of the education system to the Executive, Assembly and public for the quality of education provision and standards.
- The ETI's aim is to empower improvement for learners and in so doing, to provide the highest standards of service. It evaluates and reports on the quality of leadership and management, outcomes for learners and quality of

provision in: early years; primary and post-primary schools; special education; further education; work-based learning; European Social Fund projects; youth; initial teacher education; and education other than at school (EOTAS), as well as policy, planning and improvement work. It undertakes individual organisation inspections as well as cross-cutting thematic evaluations. Recent commissioned work includes the inspection of European Social Fund (ESF) provision (DfE), an evaluation of an aspect of provision for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), and collaborative work with the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland.

- The purpose of all inspection activity is to build capacity within the organisations inspected to provide high quality education and outcomes for learners. This is achieved by: promoting processes of self-evaluation which will endure beyond the period of the inspection; evaluating and reporting objectively and fairly on the quality of provision in the best interests of the learners; helping to inform and establish improved ways of working through professional dialogue; and identifying, affirming, reporting, and disseminating examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn.

B. Introduction to TTI in Northern Ireland

9. Test, Trace and Protect and isolation restrictions were introduced in Northern Ireland by the PHA in summer 2020. All changes on the way testing and tracing

were conducted and how they were implemented within educational setting (for example, as in September 2021), were through PHA driven changes or initiatives. Departmental officials initially provided guidance in line with DoH, PHA or CMO advice and all subsequent changes were made in close cooperation with both DoH and PHA. The Department had no legislative responsibilities nor functions other than a contributor to discussions around policies issues in relation to TTI at the Executive table.

Testing

10. As part of DHSC driven national initiatives, the Education Authority facilitated distribution of lateral flow devices (LFD) to educational settings and the Department provided guidance to educational settings under the direction of PHA on their use. The Department had no input into the inception, strategies or procedures deployed other than through its attendance at participation group meeting with representatives of the PHA. Schools were able to reorder kits through the DHSC portal.
11. In recognition of the challenge of LFT testing for pupils in special schools, in January 2021 following discussions between the Department, PHA, Queens University Belfast (QUB) and the EA, a proposal was put forward to develop a weekly test which would identify positive cases of both asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic pupils and staff in special schools. The test was a loop-mediated isothermal amplification) (LAMP) using a saliva sample analysed in QUB's laboratories for results.
12. A feasibility study was completed in Sperrin View Special School, Dungannon to test operational feasibility and to identify the best way to get sufficient saliva samples from children in a special school, with EA managing transport logistics for the programme. Whilst the Department provided financial assistance and issued letters/guidance in relation to the testing, the operational arrangements were implemented and operated by the EA on advice from the PHA.

Tracing, including Test Trace and Protect

13. On 18 May 2020 wrote to Executive colleagues advising them of arrangements for Covid-19 Digital Contact Tracing, with the PHA setting up dedicated lines for

educational settings. With cases expected to rise in the autumn of 2021, PHA introduced changes to how tracing was to be conducted, and these were introduced into educational setting on the 1 September 2021, **Exhibit RA/01- [INQ000582772]** and 3 September a letter issued to schools **Exhibit RA/02 – [INQ000443752]**. The main change was that schools were now being asked to carry out the contact tracing. This quickly became a challenge for schools and officials, with a substantial increase in workload for teachers/school staff and departmental officials (through correspondence) **Exhibit RA/03 – [INQ000582774]**.

14. Following engagement with PHA, these arrangements were reviewed and revised guidance issued to schools. Minister issuing a revised letter to schools on 9 September 2021 **Exhibit RA/04 – [INQ000582775]**, along with letters from the CMO **Exhibit RA/05 – [INQ000137386]** and the PHA **Exhibit RA/06 – [INQ000582788]** along with advice **Exhibit RA/07 – [INQ000582778]**. This was followed up by a detailed guidance note from the Department on 14 September 2021 **Exhibit RA/08 – [INQ000440831]** developed in conjunction with the Practitioner Steering group (see paragraph 23).

Isolation

15. My officials recognise the term isolation as in relation to individuals who had tested positive with Coronavirus or were isolating due to having a medical condition or with a family member who was at risk. Officials have confirmed that they had no input into the restrictions or development of the isolation policies, but were directed by the DoH, Executive or PHA as to what conditions should be included in guidance.
16. Requirements for isolation were included in guidance issued by the Department in the NEW School New Day Guidance, issued on the 13 August 2020, reflecting the extant PHA advice. Throughout the pandemic as this advice was updated, officials amended DE guidance in line with the PHA advice. Examples include Annex A issued in August 2020 Management of People Who Become Symptomatic Onsite **Exhibit RA/09 – [INQ000582783]**, Annex B Test , Trace, Protect **Exhibit RA/10 - [INQ000582778]**, Annex C Covid-19 Management Flowchart Possible/confirmed Covid-19 Case in school **Exhibit RA/11 –**

[INQ000582785], and Annex D Template for Reporting a Confirmed Case of Covid-19 Exhibit RA/12 – [INQ000582786].

C. Decision-making structures for TTI

17. The Department contributes to regional level civil contingency arrangements, including through representation on the NI Civil Contingencies Group (CCGNI – typically Permanent Secretary level and chaired by the Head of the Civil Service); and Command, Control and Coordination (C3) Leads (Director Level). These are coordinated regionally by TEO.
18. Within this context, the Department has specific responsibility for oversight of preparedness, response and recovery arrangements for the education sector. This includes liaison with the Department's Arm's Length Bodies including but not limited to the Education Authority (EA), Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
19. Under the regional arrangements, the Department was involved in planning for emergencies such as those associated with EU Exit risks and a flu-type pandemic. The DoH led on pandemic preparedness with policy input from the Department on matters such as school closure.
20. Arrangements for any major civil contingency issue, if stood up, included Departmental Operating Centres (DOCs) reporting to a regional NI Hub (TEO-led).
21. The Department holds a Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP) which provides a framework for the central management and coordination of a high-level response, by the Department, to a range of possible emergencies which may involve the Department. This document was created in 2008 and, along with business continuity plans, was invoked at the onset of Covid-19, including the implementation of a DOC by the Department. In addition, in response to the pandemic the Department paused some areas of work and reallocated resources to form a Covid-19 Response Team which coordinated the sectoral response, including supporting the closure of schools, the rollout of technology and guidance for the operation of schools out-with lockdown periods.

22. On the 13 March the Department met with Education Sector Stakeholders to discuss the emerging issues caused by the pandemic, minutes of this meeting are evidenced in **Exhibit RA/044 - [INQ000176141]**. The Department's MERP and Departmental Operating Centre (DOC) were formally invoked / established on 19 March 2020 by the then Permanent Secretary Derek Baker at a meeting of the DE Covid-19 Contingency Planning Group see **Exhibit RA/045 - [INQ000087625]** minutes of meeting. A further meeting including the ALBs was held on the 10 April, minutes are evidenced as **Exhibit RA/046 - [INQ000176142]**. The MERP was then superseded by Covid-19 specific arrangements with the reactivation of C3 Structures in the Department (i.e. the DOC) thereafter, with the formal de-escalation of the Department's MERP taking place on 25 May 2020.
23. The Department chaired a practitioner group meeting made up of educational settings principals, which ranged from nursery/pre-school to post primary settings and, representatives from the EA and PHA. This group considered how best to operationalise public health guidance within education settings and considered the merits of any policy options available.
24. A separate group made up of trade union member were also consulted in relation to changes to guidance and how best to implement non pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) within schools. These groups whilst not specifically used for TTI, provided input into various NPIs including TTI. The groups met regularly as the pandemic progressed and facilitated development and adaptation of educational guidance based on the up-to-date position from DoH and PHA. To allow free and frank discussion these meetings were not minuted.
25. In January 2021 a Project Board for the Asymptomatic Covid-19 Testing Programme was established, made up of officials from DoH, EA, PHA and chaired by James Hutchnson, from the Department.

D. Decision-makers for TTI

26. The main decision makers for the Department were the Ministers for Education, who were Peter Weir and Michelle McIlveen during this period and the various Departmental officials listed above.

27. The main departmental officials involved with discussions around TTI would have been John Smith and James Hutchinson. These officials met regularly with CMO, CSA and DoH and PHA officials to aid overall management of Covid-19 within the education sector.
28. The Department does not recognise the term 'Education Cell', the PHA created a "school's cell" made up of teams of experienced staff specifically set up to work with educational settings to identify close contacts of positive cases and advise the relevant self-isolation periods required for parents, relatives and teachers/educational staff.

E. Chronology and legislation

29. A chronology of key events/advice and actions which the Department issued to schools or was involved in is attached at **Exhibit RA/13 – [INQ000582787]**.
30. The Department has no responsibilities for further, higher education settings or colleges or universities these are governed by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland.

F. Co-working

31. The Minister met with their Executive colleagues, and it is my understanding that minutes and papers relating these to these have been provided by the Executive Office and were covered under Modules 1 and 2C. Officials had no formal or informal discussions with local government or councils on TTI issues, or any of the other UK jurisdictions.
32. The Department's engagement was through meeting with DoH officials and PHA mainly in how to incorporate NPIs within schools. Decisions on TTI and how this changed throughout the pandemic was through the advice the Department provided to educational settings based on any changes in advice from PHA.
33. In terms of supporting the work that was required to support vulnerable children and young people, the department established the Joint Health/Education Oversight Group.

34. This group firstly acted as a mechanism to support risk assessments of vulnerable children and young people to support their access to school and then evolved to support discussions in relation to vulnerable children and young people. This group was jointly chaired by Richard Irwin and the DoH Grade 5.
35. The Department also instigated a weekly meeting with Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group to discuss any emergent issues and provide support to the schools. This group was chaired by Richard Irwin and included participation from EA, PHA and the DoH.
36. The EA Sensory Service advised that arrangements were made in March 2020 for all children to be able to take their assistive technology home to enable continued access to learning. Guidance on the use of assistive technology was made available on the Sensory Service area of the EA website. Parents had direct access to Teachers of the Deaf for any troubleshooting issues or advice on the use of assistive technology at home.
37. The Department also understands that assistive technology for the new school year (September 2021) was purchased and was ready for children and young people when schools re-opened. Children and young people were able to take assistive technology home with support provided on appropriate use.
38. The Department did not engage or hold any formal or informal discussions with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on TTI issues.
39. The Permanent Secretary at the time Derek Baker had a number of telephone conversations with his counterpart in Dublin, the Secretary General of the Irish Department of Education, to exchange information about their respective plans for addressing some of the challenges posed by the pandemic for education, focusing in particular on remote teaching and learning, addressing the needs of special needs pupils and arrangements for public examinations. These conversations did not extend to TTI issues, nor were these conversations minuted as they were simply an informal exchange of information about developments in each jurisdiction.

G. System readiness

40. The Department was not involved in the planning or organisation of TTI other than through the emergency planning groups in which it was involved in. This area would not be within the Department's vires to consider.
41. The Department had no role in the collection or sharing of positive cases with the UK jurisdictions other than for a short period in September 2021 when it was agreed between the Minister and Health Minister that school principals would provide close contact information to PHA after schools were asked by the PHA to carry out close contact tracing.

H. Flow of scientific advice

42. The Department met regularly with the CMO, CSA, officials within the DoH and PHA, information requests were either verbally requested at these meeting through way of updates or formally via email requests.
43. Officials believe that the ongoing engagement throughout the pandemic lead to good working relationships and the only barrier to the flow of information was due to the unpredictability of the virus.

I. Testing

44. The Department did not have any role in the development of policy and rules in relation to the Lateral flow device ("LFD"), Polymerase chain reaction ("PCR"), onsite rapid asymptomatic testing, or at-home testing and asymptomatic testing. The Department did provide guidance to educational settings through links to the PHA website and issuing messages to schools evidenced by **Exhibit RA/14 – [INQ000582788]**.
45. In August 2020 following the publication of the NEW School Day Guidance a revised version issued with annexes which included flowcharts which highlighted what educational settings should do if they tested positive. **Exhibit RA/15 – [INQ000582789]**.
46. On 1 March 2021 the DoH **Exhibit RA/16 – [INQ000582790]** approached the Department about an initiative to identify asymptomatic individuals for a testing

programme called NI Smart – Phase 1. The Department identified groups which could potentially be involved **Exhibit RA/17 – [INQ000582791]**

47. On 15 March 2021 wrote to all school leaders to advise that all schools would be provided with kits to test twice weekly **Exhibit RA/18 – [INQ000582793]**. All educational setting began using the LFD/PCR tests, only when it became clear that this did not work within special school settings, the Department in collaboration with the EA, PHA and DoH looked at other options with the LAMP testing being suggested as an alternative by Queens University Belfast.
48. Given the short timescales and unique circumstances involved during Covid-19, no impact assessments were carried out.
49. LFD/PCR testing kits were available on sites in all schools that applied to the scheme and LAMP testing was available on special school sites only.

Prioritisation

50. The Department was not involved other than through its Minister at the Executive meetings in setting out prioritisation for any TTI. The Department did approach the DoH for prioritisation of educational staff for vaccination purposes **Exhibit RA/19 – [INQ000582794]**. However, vaccination decisions were made by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) who had responsibility for setting the priority list and have set the first priority as the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems

Special Schools testing programme

51. In January 2021 the Department put forward a proposal **Exhibit RA/20 – [INQ000441753]** to introduce a LAMP test in special schools. Discussions were held between PHA, QUB and EA about the development of the approach. Following a successful feasibility study at a Sperrin View Special School in Dungannon, a Special Schools Testing Project Board was established in May 2021 lead by the EAs Kim Scott as Chair with members from The Department, PHA, DoH and QUB and Special School Principals.

52. In December 2020 a feasibility study took place involving 6 staff and 6 children from the same school who were tested on 16 December 2020, with all tests being negative. All staff and students were invited to be tested on Monday 11 January when 26 pupils (20%) and 51 staff (66%) participated. Samples were transported to the lab by EA with results received from Queen's laboratory by 15:30 the same day, 74 samples tested negative with 3 samples considered invalid due to insufficient saliva sample obtained.
53. A key aim of the feasibility study was to test operational feasibility and to identify the best way to get sufficient saliva samples from children in a special school. A range of techniques was identified depending on the needs of the child. Weekly testing was felt to be feasible by those involved in the school. EA managed the transport logistics for the programme, with sample testing taking place in QUB LAMP lab. PHA and EA worked together to develop a range of information materials.
54. Schools shared information with parents and staff and secure consent for participation collected the samples from pupils and staff on an agreed testing day, with EA transporting them to and from QUB lab who notified the PHA and school of all results. Positive results notified to the PHA schools' team who advised on any public health management or isolation issues.
55. At this time PHA advise was that while children, even those with significant underlying medical conditions, did not generally become very unwell if they contracted Covid-19, some children in special schools have extremely complex medical needs and all possible steps should be taken to protect them. Any infection can be serious for them as their baseline condition is so fragile.
56. With Special schools remaining fully open during the period of restrictions, it was felt that the benefit children and families got from special school was very significant. The range of therapies that are only available to children in school, additionally schools provided important respite for families caring for children with complex needs. This ensured that some of the most vulnerable pupils had access to a more user-friendly test and provided a level of reassurance to families whilst maintaining what would be the normal day to day life for SEN children.

57. Following a successful bid for funding officials in EA and PHA worked with QUB to establish logistical arrangements with oversight by the Department with testing kits being delivered to schools in March 2021. A copy of some of the minutes, highlight reports and agendas are evidenced **Exhibit RA/21 – [INQ000582796]**, **Exhibit RA/22 – [INQ000582797]**, **Exhibit RA/23 – [INQ000582798]** and **Exhibit RA/24 – [INQ000582799]** further mins can be provided if required.
58. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) update was developed for schools **Exhibit RA/25 – [INQ000582800]** with tracked changes highlighting the input from the various groups involved in its development.
59. The project board monitored the effectiveness of the test situation with portal stats being reported at meetings evidenced at **Exhibit RA/26 – [INQ000582801]**, and **Exhibit RA/27 – [INQ000582802]**.
60. In June 2021 the Minister approved the extension of the scheme and a letter issued to all special schools advising that testing would continue during the summer schemes held in special schools **Exhibit RA/28 – [INQ000582803]** with the scheme continuing on following the summer, with the final meeting of the project board taking place in March 2022 **Exhibit RA/29 – [INQ000582804]**.
61. The test was a saliva-based loop-mediated isothermal amplification using a saliva sample analysed in the QUB laboratories which was conducted weekly to identify positive cases of both asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic pupils and staff in special schools. using a saliva sample analysed in QUB’s laboratories for results.
62. In February 2023 the EA produced its Post Programme Evaluation (PPE) **Exhibit RA/30 – [INQ000582805]** with the Department producing a PPE in June 2023 **Exhibit RA/31– [INQ000582806]**.
63. Northern Ireland was the only UK jurisdiction to use the LAMP testing for special needs children, in July 2021 Department for Education in England did make an enquiry about the programme **Exhibit RA/32 – [INQ000582807]**.

Asymptomatic testing

64. Roll out of the twice weekly lateral flow testing began on 22 March following the extension of the DHSC mass testing programme in schools in England **Exhibit**

RA/33- [INQ000582814]. Pupils and staff in years 12 - 14 were offered the opportunity to take part in Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests. Following the Easter holidays primary schools' staff, and pre-school nursery staff, were given the opportunity to participate. The Department worked with the PHA and EA in relation to the roll out to pupils.

65. The Minister wrote to school principals on the 15 March **Exhibit RA/34 – [INQ000582793]** announcing the rollout of the LFD testing. The Department worked closely with the EA and PHA to develop a range of information and resources for schools, students and parents.
66. This included a programme of guidance, videos and information to show staff and pupils how to correctly conduct a self-test, following consultations with participation groups made up of school principals and Trade Union Side (TUS). The EA presented to Principals on Friday 19 March informing them of the arrangements and providing them with relevant guidance.
67. In August 2020, the DOH and Social Care in England held a meeting to discuss schools testing, Janis Scanlon (senior official representing the Department) attended the meeting and advised that the Department would be interested in participating in the DHSC lead provision of testing kits in schools **Exhibit RA/35 – [INQ000582816]**.
68. In September 2020 the Department agreed to participate in the DoH and Social Care's (DHSC) home testing kit initiative for schools **Exhibit RA/36 – [INQ000582817]**, and **Exhibit RA/37 – [INQ000582818]**. Rollout of the kits commenced on 7 September 2020 and logistics around the delivery of kits were coordinated between the PHA and EA **Exhibit RA/38 – [INQ000582819]**. On 29 September the Department issued further guidance to schools on when tests should be carried out **Exhibit RA/39 – [INQ000582820]**.
69. The Department subsequently issued advise to schools in February 2021 on how to replenish stocks of kits or had they not taken the opportunity to order kits initial on how they could go about it **Exhibit RA/40 – [INQ000582821]**.

Accessibility and reporting of tests

70. The Department's involvement in the process of providing test kits to schools did not highlight any issues with the demand for kits. The Department do not hold the figures for the number of kits requested by schools as DHSC managed the portal for schools who had ordered and replenished the kits.
71. The Department was not involved with the reporting of test results and does not hold any data relating to it.

J. Tracing

- 72.** The Department was not involved in the development of policy, rules or guidance in relation to tracing, however it did provide Guidance to schools in relation to initiatives like the DoH Test, Trace and Protect Plan published in March 2022 **Exhibit RA/41 – [INQ000582822]**. The Department does not hold figures in relation to turnaround times involved in the operation of tracing.
73. The Department was not involved in the development, support, implementation or operationalisation of the StopCOVIDNI app.

K. Isolating

74. The Department was not involved in setting out isolation policy, rules or guidance other than providing schools with the latest updated guidance set out by PHA. This role was simply ensuring schools had the most up to date advice and had guidance in how to apply any rules as laid out by the PHA when self-isolating or cases which were confirmed within schools.
75. Officials developed and published several pieces of key guidance to schools and educational settings to assist them through this difficult period. These were updated and amended to reflect the scientific evidence available at that time.
76. This includes Northern Ireland Re-opening Schools Guidance – New School Day which was first published on 19 June, and subsequently on 13 August 2020. A further updated version of the guidance – Coronavirus (Covid-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland was published on 29 September 2020. Additional guidance for special school education settings was published on 24 August 2020 that was to be read alongside the overarching

Northern Ireland Re-opening Schools Guidance – New School Day, an example of the published Guidance which issued in December 2020 **Exhibit RA/42 – [INQ000582823]**.

77. Development and update of the guidance was an open and transparent process. Inputs and views were sought from and provided by the PHA, TUS and the Practitioner's group.
78. Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings was constantly under review and updated as needed and driven by health advice provided by the CMO and CSA.

Support to those isolating

79. The Department understands the meaning of isolation to be in relation to positive cases of Covid-19 and not the initial lockdown by the Northern Ireland Executive.
80. The Department provided no additional practical or financial to children isolating outside of the funding for food provision to pupils entitled to Free School Meals who are not in attendance at school due to Covid-19 restrictions and provision of remote learning via the school.
81. Practical support was provided through the availability of LFD kits at schools which allowed pupils to test daily, which often lead to pupils/staff having to isolate.
82. For educational staff within schools the Department provided guidance through its Absence Pay and Staffing Guidance with financial assistance being provided by the temporary provision of normal pay for those who had tested positive for Covid-19, the length of time of the temporary suspension aligned with the isolation periods recommended by the PHA.

L. Data & tackling Educational Disadvantage

83. The Department had no role in the collection or processing of data in relation to TTI other than the issuing of guidance to schools or collection of the management information on attendance of pupils and workforce in schools. The management information was collected from schools to allow the Department to monitor attendance in schools during this time.

M. Modelling

84. The Department did not participate in any modelling or provide advice on the appropriateness or otherwise of NPIs, nor did the Department provide any input into modelling scenarios.

N. Communication

85. The DoH and the PHA took forward the roll-out of a Test, Trace, Isolate public information campaign. This can be expanded upon by the DoH and PHA in their own evidence to the Inquiry.
86. Although the Department was not the lead department in the communication of public health messaging relating to Test, Trace, Isolate, the Department fully supported the work being carried out by the PHA and incorporated relevant messaging into communications to schools and educational settings. The Department issued letters directly to schools and educational settings to update them throughout the pandemic as changes to legislation or guidance came about, these encompassed statements in relation to TTI but not specific to them.
87. There was unprecedented demand from the media to speak to all Executive Ministers and daily press conferences with Executive Ministers helped to meet this demand. The vast majority of press conferences were conducted by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, however key messages were supplied by the Department to reinforce public health information to schools, parents and pupils.
88. News releases and organic social media content outlining Ministerial decisions were issued regularly throughout the pandemic. In total, the Department issued 246 press releases from February 2020 to June 2022, although not all of these were related to TTI.
89. The press releases summarised advice and guidance for parents and pupils and key announcements relating to schools. Topics ranged from Covid-19 guidance

for education settings, guidance on remote learning and NPIs, measures to support childcare settings, and announcements for summer schemes and counselling services, amongst other information.

90. On 21 December 2020, the Education Minister made a statement to the Assembly/ Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly on the resumption of schools following the Christmas break in 2020, and about potential further actions to be taken within the education sector to limit the transmission of the Covid-19 virus.
91. As part of the statement, the Minister expressed the need for a number of additional steps and actions to be taken in education to help limit the spread of the virus and protect students, parents and education staff alike.
92. These steps included how messaging could be used to make an impact with educational settings and young people in the following areas:
 - Extension of the use of face coverings within post primary schools.
 - Compliance on face coverings and safety measures on school transport.
 - Improving behaviour around drop off and collection of students at the school gates.
 - Improving responsible behaviour and safety in connection with the pandemic.
93. The Department had an advertising campaign contract with Ardmere Advertising and the press office worked with the Government Advertising Unit to develop an advertising campaign to support the resumption of schools. The creative approach used photo imagery of children in school and included agreed messaging around face coverings, safety measures on school transport, drop off and collection of pupils at the school gates; and improving responsible behaviour and safety in connection with the pandemic.
94. The Executive Office, DoH and PHA NI commissioned qualitative research to seek insight on public perception of Covid-19, including Test Trace and Isolate messaging and to help inform the Executive's communication approach. As research was being coordinated by the Executive Office, the Department did not commission research or evaluation in relation to communications with educational settings.

95. The Executive's Covid-19 Taskforce was established in December 2020 to co-ordinate the Executive's ongoing response to, and recovery from, the pandemic. This includes four work strands, including adherence.
96. The Adherence Group brought together departmental stakeholders as well as enforcement agencies to provide input into how changes in law and guidance impact on adherence, how to best encourage compliance with the public health messaging, such as Test, Trace, Isolate, and to work with behavioural science experts to support efforts to reduce transmission of the virus.
97. As part of the work of the Adherence Group, the NI Innovation Lab and Behavioural Insights Team, within DoF, were commissioned to examine enforcement issues, attitudes and behaviours relating to adherence to Covid-19 guidance and legislation, this included Test, Trace, Isolate.
98. The Department was able to use the findings of the Adherence Group to inform communications with schools, parents and pupils. Evidence in the form of compliance with the requirements within school settings was also clear from the feedback from the practitioners group and educational establishments.
99. Any media released by the Department mirrored that of the public health messages being released by the DoH and Infrastructure in relation to travel, and whilst timings may have differed within the various jurisdictions due to the prevalence of the virus and differing stages of the pandemic within them, overall, the messaging was consistent.
100. The Department would suggest that given the obvious differences in timelines of the pandemic and announcements by various jurisdictions that there was some confusion as to what restrictions applied to the various areas. Communications from parents and teachers would suggest that restrictions i.e. placed in England, which were not in effect in Northern Ireland would often be quoted.
101. Trying to meet that demand for information was difficult and throughout the pandemic Executive decisions were reported, in full or in part, on the news or social media in advance of any formal Executive statement.

102. The speed at which decisions were being taken meant that it was not possible to prepare communication materials in advance of Executive meetings to reflect the proposed decisions of an Executive paper.

O. Inequalities

103. The Department were not made aware of any inequalities in TTI. When the issue around testing on SEN children was identified, the Department moved quickly to address this through the introduction of the LAMP testing.
104. Further development of a diverse range of testing methods could potentially allow for a better and more favourable approach to testing, which might, encourage people to take up the opportunity as the LFD kit was often sited as a reason parents/children refused to test.

P. Lessons learned and recommendations

105. The Department has not yet commissioned, nor does it foresee the need to commission, a formal review or lessons learned exercise in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, with regards to TTI, this due to its limited input to it during the pandemic.
106. Revised arrangements for contact tracing within educational settings when Principals were asked to carry out the test and trace proved unmanageable and controversial, attracting considerable public and political attention.
107. The Department regarded the issue of schools carrying out contact tracing as an issue which would need to be addressed going forward. The systems implemented by PHA, placed too much onus and responsibility on educational professionals to try and carry out a testing regime which they were unfamiliar with and with little support and no additional resources. Concerns about the handling of potentially hazardous material within the school environment were also raised by teachers.

108. Although not directly established to deal with TTI issues, the Department feels that having the safe space of the Practitioners Group and TUS where practitioners and policy makers were able to engage on the co-design of guidance went extremely well and provided opportunity for free and frank discussion to develop practical and workable solutions to enable the restart of the education system.
109. This was particularly useful for discussions around the issues of testing and provision of LFD kits, LAMP testing within special schools, practical solutions to isolations issues within schools and the contact tracing issue when schools were asked to become more involved with this. This is evidenced by the fact that a number of business areas continue to use the PG or a group very similar as a sounding board for new policy areas.
110. The LAMP testing in the special schools although not fully utilised was a good example of collaboration between public bodies and educational establishments, this could be further developed in future to make testing easier for vulnerable children in the event of a reoccurrence of a similar pandemic.
111. I would also consider the collaboration between DoH, PHA and EA was extremely beneficial with the organisations working effectively to put measures in place promptly to ensure the safety of children and young people in educational settings.

Q. Further information

112. Officials have advised that there is no further evidence they wish to provide to the Inquiry of any relevance.

Statement of Truth

We believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. We understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signature

Signature

Signature

Personal Data

Ronnie Armour
Acting Permanent
Secretary
Date: 11.6.2025

Dr Mark Browne
Permanent Secretary
Date: 11.6.2025

Derek Baker
Former Permanent
Secretary
Date: 11.6.2025