

Witness Name: Heather Cousins

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

MODULE 8 - WITNESS STATEMENT OF HEATHER COUSINS, FORMER DEPUTY SECRETARY OF SKILLS AND EDUCATION GROUP WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT FOR THE ECONOMY (NORTHERN IRELAND)

I, Heather Cousins, of Rathgael House, Balloo Road, Bangor, BT19 7PR, formerly the Deputy Secretary of Skills and Educations Group within the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), will say as follows: -

1. I was a Deputy Secretary for the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland) (DfE) since its establishment in May 2016 to July 2023. Between 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022 ("the Specified Period") I held the position of Deputy Secretary of Skills and Education Group.
2. DfE has responsibility for the development and delivery of post-16 Skills and Education provision across Northern Ireland, which are within the Skills and Education Group, over which I had responsibility in my role as Deputy Secretary, including:
 - a) Further Education – full and part time education to those over compulsory school leavers age;
 - b) Higher Education – tertiary level education including undergraduate and postgraduate study;
 - c) Vocational Qualifications including Apprenticeships - work-related qualifications designed to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed for specific jobs or industries;
 - d) Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – a framework developed by DfE to address skills imbalances in the Northern Ireland economy;
 - e) Careers advice and guidance - the provision of impartial and personalised advice and guidance on an all-age basis.

3. I am currently the Deputy Secretary of the Sustainability and Infrastructure Group in the Northern Ireland Department of Education (DE); I took up this position in July 2023. As a Deputy Secretary in DE, I have not been involved in the DE response to Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry (the Inquiry) other than to proof-read the response.
4. In normal circumstances, this Statement would be made by DfE's Permanent Secretary. However, DfE's Permanent Secretary during the Specified Period, Mike Brennan, retired in February 2024. Due to my role in the Skills and Education Group during the Specified Period I am making this Statement on behalf of DfE.
5. I make this Statement for the purpose of Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. The documents referred to throughout this Statement are annexed hereto.

Background and General Overview of DfE

6. DfE was established in May 2016 shortly after the Northern Ireland Assembly Election in 2016 and is one of nine government departments headed by Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive.
7. The 2016 re-organisation of the government departments consolidated 11 departments into nine with DfE encompassing the functions previously assigned to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), with the exception of the Employment Service which was assigned to the Department for Communities (DfC). This was the first time Further Education and Higher Education sat alongside the wider economy portfolio. The Department of Education (DE) retains responsibility for Early Years education (ages 0-4), primary education, post-primary education, special education and youth service (the provision of informal education and youth programmes to young people aged 4-25 across Northern Ireland).
8. DfE's overarching mission is to develop and implement agile policies and programmes which promote a competitive, sustainable and inclusive economy through investment in skills, economic infrastructure, research and innovation and business development.
9. DfE's responsibilities include:
 - a) Developing/implementing wider economic policy relating to Northern Ireland, including specific areas like Energy, Tourism and Telecoms;
 - b) the operation of a range of employment and skills programmes;

- c) oversight and funding of the further and higher education sectors;
- d) various aspects of employment law; and
- e) the management and operation of various EU funding programmes.

10. During the Specified Period, to deliver its mission and strategic objectives, DfE was structured into five Groups, covering the main policy areas for DfE as follows:

- a) International and Economic Relations (formerly the EU Exit Preparation and Transition Group before reorganisation in June 2021);
- b) Economic Strategy;
- c) Management Services and Regulation;
- d) Skills and Education; and
- e) Energy.

Division of Roles and Responsibilities in Northern Ireland

11. Roles and responsibilities in relation to children and young people in further or higher education, apprenticeships and training is divided across several Northern Ireland government departments, of which the main three are:

- a) the Department of Education (DE)
- b) the Department for the Economy (DfE), and
- c) the Department of Health (DoH).

12. DfE has policy responsibility for further and higher education, apprenticeships and training in Northern Ireland. The work on these policy areas is undertaken by DfE's Skills and Education Group (SEG).

13. During the Specified Period, the SEG was split into seven Divisions, namely:

- a) Higher Education - The Higher Education Division is responsible for developing policy and administering grant funding to support Higher Education and research-related activities undertaken by the Higher Education Institutions, and for quality assurance over the Higher Education sector.
- b) Further Education - The Further Education Division is responsible for the six NI further education colleges which are Non-Departmental Public Bodies. The Division provides funding for colleges as well as ensuring policy and guidance, estates strategies and governance are in place to deliver further education across Northern Ireland.

- c) Skills - The Skills Division is responsible for the strategic skills agenda with a key focus on overseeing the delivery of DfE's skills strategy, '*Skills for a 10x Economy*'. The division also delivers a range of important pre and post employment skills programmes including "*Assured Skills*", "*Skill Up*" and "*Innovate Us*".
- d) Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education Division - The Apprenticeships, Careers & Vocational Education Division (ACVED) is responsible for the delivery of vocational work-based and education learning programmes such as Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Training for Success and Skills for Life Work provision. In addition, ACVED oversees the delivery of careers advice and guidance alongside priority work streams outlined in the Economy Minister's Economic Vision.
- e) Strategic Portfolio Management - The Strategic Portfolio Management Division is responsible for identifying linkages and improving coordination across the Skills and Education Group (SEG), taking the lead in any cross-cutting issue, whether that be across the group, DfE or Northern Ireland Civil Service.
- f) Tertiary Education Reform (Formed September 2021) - The Tertiary Education Reform Division is responsible for ensuring an effective supply of qualifications to meet the needs of employers, the economy and students.
- g) Quality Improvement - The Quality Improvement Team is responsible for monitoring and reporting the quality of provision across Further Education, Training, Employment and European Social Funded programmes. The team, via the Quality Improvement Advisor, reports to senior management within DfE on the quality of provision across these sectors.

14. Education is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. DE has statutory responsibilities in respect of Early Years education (ages 0-4), primary school education, post-primary education, special education and youth service. The statutory functions of DE are contained throughout various pieces of Northern Ireland legislation. In terms of core policy, there is some overlap between DfE and DE, in relation to the education of students aged 16-19 years old with DfE having policy responsibility in relation to Further Education and Higher Education settings, whereas DE has policy responsibility in relation to post primary schools, both of which cater for children and young people between the ages of 16-19.

15. DoH has statutory responsibilities in respect of children aged 16-17 who are in, or have left, care, as well as those aged 18 to 21 (and, on occasion beyond that age) who have previously been in care, as set out in Articles 34 to 35D of the Children (Northern Ireland)

Order 1995, as amended by the Children Leaving Care Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, and the Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. Specifically, Article 35B of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 relates to employment, education and training. DoH is best placed to comment further on this.

16. Other Northern Ireland government departments have roles and responsibilities in relation to children and young people in further or higher education, apprenticeships and training, including the Department of Justice for the delivery of learning and skills to children and young people in custody through the Northern Ireland Prisons Service (NIPS) and DAERA for the provision of Further and Higher Education courses through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

17. To assist with understanding the roles and actions of DfE and its SEG in respect of children and young people in further or higher education, apprenticeships and training impacting young people during the Specified Period, I have divided the remainder of this statement into three sections below:

- a) Section 1 - Further Education
- b) Section 2 - Higher Education
- c) Section 3 - Apprenticeships, Careers, Training and Skills.

Section 1 - Further Education

Roles and Responsibilities

18. The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 ("the 1997 Order") sets out the duties and powers of DfE towards young people accessing further education (FE). Sections 4-9 of the 1997 Order include provisions in respect of:

- a) the funding of Further Education,
- b) the establishment, amalgamation, recognition and discontinuance of Further Education institutions (Further Education colleges).

19. There are six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland each having the status of Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and which are required to have in place Instruments and Articles of Government (legal documents that outline the college's constitution, responsibilities and functions). The six Further Education colleges are:

- a) Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC);
- b) Northern Regional College (NRC);

- c) North West Regional College (NWRC);
- d) South Eastern Regional College; (SERC)
- e) Southern Regional College (SRC); and
- f) South West College (SWC).

20. DfE is the Sponsor Department in relation to the Further Education colleges, meaning it provides guidance, oversight and financial support and holding them to account for their performance in line with the requirements set out in legislation and the conditions of the Management Statement and Financial Memorandums (the MS/FMs) which was in place from October 2018 to January 2024. **Exhibits [HC-8/001 – INQ000613930, HC-8/002 – INQ000613931, HC-8/003 – INQ000613932, HC-8/004 – INQ000613933, HC-8/005 – INQ000613934, HC-8/006 – INQ000613935]** The MS/FMs are agreements between DfE and each College outlining the terms and conditions for funding provided by DfE to the colleges.

21. DfE has statutory powers to make grants, loans or other payments for the purposes of, or in connection with, the provision of further education under Articles 4(2)(a)(ii) and 5(1) and (2) of the 1997 Order. Further, DfE may set conditions in relation to any such payment, including a power to require repayment if any conditions are not complied with under Article 5(3) and (4).

22. The 1997 Order and Management Statement and Financial Memorandum referred to at paragraph 20 above provide the framework under which the governing bodies (the corporate boards of the Further Education colleges) and the Principal/Chief Executive of Further Education colleges are required to operate. Under Article 13(1) of the 1997 Order, the governing body of a Further Education college is responsible for ensuring that it provides, or secures the provision of, suitable and efficient further education to students of the college and (subject to Article 16) higher education to students in the area in which the college is situated, having regard to the educational needs of industry and commerce in the community.

23. The Further Education colleges are responsible for all young people attending the college, including their wellbeing, learning and attainment, the provision of education and training, financial assistance, setting fees and accommodation under Article 14(1) of the 1997 Order. These responsibilities are reflected in the Management Statement and Financial Memorandum between DfE and each of the six Colleges.

24. Further Education colleges provide DfE with annual College Development Plans which outline targets for the incoming academic year, with a focus on learning provision. DfE approves the College Development Plans for each Further Education college which contain Key Performance Indicators regarding the number of students and their attainment of qualifications. The key strategic oversight and accountability arrangements for DfE to hold Further Education colleges to account for their performance is via in-year monitoring against performance metrics included in the agreed College Development Plans and assurances obtained via annual Accountability meetings, where the Further Education colleges update DfE on performance, explain any variances and where actions are agreed to address any significant issues identified.
25. In July 2020, the Permanent Secretary agreed to a temporary simplified College Development Plan process to better reflect how the colleges will deal with the pace and scale of the change that would be required and the need for investment in provision to help economic recovery in response to Covid-19. This included development of a set of principles upon which college delivery was based, taking into account the SEG programme of work, designed around the response, recovery and renewed approach. The simplified College Development Plan process was utilised in 2020/21 - 2022/23 against which progress was monitored.
26. DfE has responsibility for setting policy including eligibility to attend further education colleges and student support policies insofar as they support the wellbeing of young people accessing further education (excepting those established by the DE which DfE mirrors). This includes the policies and funding of financial support to enable students to access Further Education. However, the funding is administered and delivered to the students by the Education Authority (under DE) and Further Education colleges.
27. Further Education colleges also provide Higher Education courses (HE in FE). HE in FE serves an economic purpose but also a social purpose, as Further Education colleges significantly increase opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate, making HE in FE a key contributor to DfE's overall vision.
28. DfE liaises with a number of other organisations in relation to further education, including:
- a) The Department of Justice (DoJ) - responsibility for the delivery of learning and skills to children and young people in custody lies with the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), an agency within DoJ. NIPS operates a Service Level Agreement with BMC for the delivery of an educational curriculum in each

prison establishment. DfE is a member of the Strategic Management Board which oversees the planned delivery of this curriculum in the prison environment, however, DoJ is best placed to provide further details on the delivery of learning and skills in NIPS as the Department with responsibility over the agency;

- b) DE - co-operation between the school sector and Further Education colleges sits within the DE's Entitlement Framework policy, to ensure that a broad and balanced curriculum is available to those aged 16 and over. DE is best placed to provide further details on the Entitlement Framework policy;
- c) Education Authority (EA) – the EA is an NDPB of DE and is responsible for the delivery of education and youth services in Northern Ireland and is legally delegated to administer student finance on behalf of DfE, including financial support to students in Further Education colleges;
- d) Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) – CCEA is an NDPB of DE responsible for keeping under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment for grant aided schools including the Further Education colleges;
- e) Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) – The ETI is a part of DE and provides inspection services and information about the quality of education, youth provision and training in Northern Ireland. It also provides inspection services for the DfE in Further Education Colleges;
- f) Student Unions – DfE liaises with the National Union of Students- Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) in relation to students concerns, including student support and policies; and
- g) Trade Unions – DfE liaises with Trade Unions on issues and concerns raised by lecturers and staff within the Further Educations colleges, including on industrial disputes of pay offers.

DfE's role in decisions pertaining to young peoples' access to further education during the specified period.

29. The significant decisions that were made by DfE in relation to young people's access to further education during the specified period are summarised below.

Decisions relating to access to educational facilities

30. On 5 February 2020, DfE's Director of Further Education, Beverley Harrison, requested the Further Education colleges to update their Business Continuity/Pandemic Plans and

sought their unequivocal agreement to close in the event of escalation of Covid-19. Previous discussions around the closure of Further Education colleges which happened in November 2018 are explained in paragraphs 42 and 43. **Exhibit [HC-8/007 – INQ000613936]**.

31. Also in February 2020, a decision was taken to include a power in the Coronavirus legislation for DfE to direct closure of the Further Education colleges if deemed necessary **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**.

32. On 25 March 2020, the Coronavirus Act 2020 received Royal Assent and Section 37 (3)(b) included powers for DfE to direct the closure of FE and Higher Education (HE) institutions in Northern Ireland. This power had been agreed by the Minister for the Economy in correspondence to the Minister of Health on 27 February 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**. These powers were not used however, as the Further Education colleges informed DfE on 18 March 2020 that the six Further Education colleges in NI had collectively decided to suspend all face-to-face teaching from 17:00hrs on Friday 20 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/009 – INQ000613938]**.

33. On 5 June 2020, the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, established the Advisory and Oversight Group for the Safe Resumption of On-site Educational Provision and Related Activity (AOG). The AOG included representatives from DfE, the Further Education colleges and Non-Statutory Contractors (providers of training programmes in Northern Ireland), Trade Unions and advisors including DfE's Quality Improvement Advisor and the Educational and Training Inspectorate. The AOG's Terms of Reference can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/010 – INQ000613939]**.

34. The purpose of the AOG was to advise providers of further education and DfE on adopting a risk-based approach to preparing for the safe resumption for staff and students of on-site educational delivery and related activity in a new operating environment and to obtain their assurance on compliance with direction and guidance issued by the UK Government where applicable, and the NI Assembly, and to provide advice to the Economy Minister Diane Dodds MLA, on their readiness to do so.

35. In August 2020, DfE developed the Framework for the Safe Resumption for On-site Educational Provision Related Activity ("the Framework") in preparation of the return of learners to Further Education college premises. It was developed in conjunction with guidance from the Northern Ireland Public Health Agency (PHA) and the AOG. The first

version of this was issued to the chair of the Further Education college Principals Group, a working group of the Principals/Chief Executives of each of the Further Education colleges, on 19 August 2020 and published online and can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/011 – INQ000613940]**. Subsequent versions of the Framework were developed as non-pharmaceutical interventions and PHA guidance were amended, and were published in September 2020, February 2021 and May 2021. Each version of the Framework includes a table highlighting the changes made at each version and the final version can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/012 – INQ000613941]**.

Decisions in respect of changes to policies

36. On 23 March 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to the provision of a direct payment (£2.70 per day) for each pupil/student who was entitled to Free School Meals, to allow the families of these pupils to pay for meals that they would have received had the schools not closed. Following this, DE instructed the EA to administer these payments, including for FE Students. DfE has policy responsibility for the provision of free school meals to eligible Further Education pupils/students. This new arrangement resulted in additional costs for DfE, as payments were made to all students based on five days attendance, while full time FE students would not necessarily attend a Further Education campus five days per week. DfE sought and received additional funding from the Northern Ireland Executive in August 2020 to cover these additional costs.
37. The Northern Ireland Executive agreed to provide additional funding to extend the Free School Meals payments over school holidays at multiple points during the Specified Period, on 18 June 2020 for Summer 2020, 22 October 2020 for Halloween 2020 and on 19 November 2020 for Christmas 2020 to Easter 2022. DfE agreed that DE would take the lead in developing the scheme and securing the necessary funding from the Northern Ireland Executive, as confirmed on 17 November 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/013 – INQ000613942]**.
38. In August 2020, the DfE Director of Further Education, Beverley Harrison, approved updates to the childcare support (a grant administered by the EA to provide support to students with dependent children who use childcare) and transport support (provision of transport support to and from Further Education colleges for eligible students) for operational purposes and to adhere with new guidelines produced by the EA and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI). Applications for support were moved to online, with guidance relating to the support available for students, social distancing and other risk

mitigations, with new Covid-19 specific guidance agreed with and published on the Education Authority website.

39. In September 2020, the DfE Director of Further Education, Beverley Harrison, approved an extension to the deadline for Further Education grant applications by one month due to reduced numbers applying compared to the equivalent point in the previous year, allowing students additional time to apply for financial support for their studies. **Exhibit [HC-8/014 – INQ000613943]**

40. On 4 February 2021, DfE amended the Hardship Fund eligibility criteria to align part-time entitlement with full-time entitlement, allowing students to apply to all elements of the Hardship Fund. The Hardship Fund is intended to provide support to learners who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting the costs associated with learning and is administered by the Further Education colleges and governed by DfE. To ensure no eligible students who had faced hardship since the start of the term were disadvantaged, this was backdated to September 2020. **Exhibit [HC-8/015 – INQ000613944].**

Provision of additional funding to Further Education colleges

41. Throughout the Specified Period, a total of c£21m was allocated by DfE to Further Education colleges after they had bid for additional support and secured by the Economy Minister through Northern Ireland Executive allocations, including:

- a) £5m (£3m in 2020/21 and £2m in 2021/22) for loss of income including student fees, training fees and room hire;
- b) £7.1m (£3.9m in 2020/21 and £3.2m in 2021/22) for Safe Learning Environment expenditure, to support the safe resumption of learning in Further Education;
- c) £5.2m (£4.8m in 2020/21 and £0.4m in 2021/22) for IT and digital access to allow for off-site learning;
- d) £1.7m in 2020/21 for Data Poverty payments, where all eligible students in Further Education colleges were given a one-off payment of £60 support towards additional data costs required to facilitate online-learning; and
- e) £1.7m in 2020/21 for Covid Disruption Payment, where all eligible higher education students undertaking study within a Further Education college were provided with a one-off payment of £500 in line with those attending universities.

Pre-pandemic and Covid-19 pandemic planning in respect of Further Education

42. In late 2018 to early 2019, DfE engaged with the Department for Education in England (DfE England) **Exhibit [HC-8/016 – INQ000613945]** and DoH and The Executive Office (TEO) **Exhibit [HC-8/017 – INQ000613946]** on the Draft Pandemic Influenza (Emergency) Bill in regard to the power to close Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions during an emergency.
43. DfE considered the necessity of powers to close the educational establishments and on 31 October 2018 the then Permanent Secretary of DfE, Noel Lavery, wrote to the Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions, noting that DfE considered the powers to close educational establishments to be a last resort option and noting that the institutions had contingency procedures in place that included the closure of institutions if required **Exhibit [HC-8/018 – INQ000613949]**. The letter sought unequivocal agreement and commitment from each institution to close in the event of such a pandemic. DfE subsequently received this unequivocal agreement from all institutions and did not add any clauses to the draft bill. The draft was not subsequently enacted.
44. Within DfE there were Business Continuity Plans (BCP) in place prior to January 2020 to provide guidance in the event of a disruption to normal business from unexpected or unforeseen events or as a result of any major incidents, including pandemics. BCPs are created at a divisional level, with each of the seven divisions of the Skills and Education Group (SEG) preparing and maintaining their own BCP.
45. The Further Education Division BCP **Exhibit [HC-8/019 – INQ000613950]** identified risks to business-critical functions of the Division, (for example the processing payments to the Further Education colleges) and set out procedures for ensuring the continuity of, or minimising disruption to, these functions.
46. Whilst the closure of colleges was not explicitly referenced in the Further Education Division's BCP, each of the six Further Education colleges are directly responsible for their own business continuity planning and the management of incidents relating to the Further Education college. Each of the six Further Education colleges provide assurance to DfE that they have appropriately robust plans in place through their biannual assurance statements, and on 5 February 2020 the DfE Director for Further Education, Beverley

Harrison, wrote to the Further Education colleges asking for their BCPs to be updated in case of escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

47. In February 2020, there was engagement involving DoH and TEO at a local level and the UK Government to develop a legislative approach to closure of facilities in response to Covid-19. On 17 February 2020, DfE officials advised the Minister's office that the intention was to include clauses granting DfE powers to close the Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions as a precautionary measure. The Minister for the Economy wrote to the Minister of Health on 27 February 2020 confirming she had agreed to this draft clause being included in the UK Coronavirus Bill **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**.

48. These powers were not used however, as the Further Education colleges informed DfE on 18 March 2020 that the 6 Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland had collectively decided to suspend all face-to-face teaching from 17:00hrs Friday 20 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/009 – INQ000613938]**.

Decision making in respect of further education

The initial response to the pandemic (January – March 2020)

49. Between January and March 2020, as the Covid-19 situation evolved, DfE considered various sources of advice and factors to guide Further Education colleges. The primary sources of advice included:

- a) Public Health Guidance: DfE closely monitored updates from the Public Health Agency (PHA) to assess the safety of keeping educational facilities open. This included evaluating transmission rates and implementing recommended health measures; and
- b) DE Communications: DE provided regular updates on the status of schools and educational institutions, which influenced decisions regarding Further Education colleges.

50. DfE is not aware of any specific advice provided on the effect that closing further education facilities might have on the transmission of Covid-19 in the community. Public Health advice at the time suggested that the transmission of the virus could be minimised by restricting contact.

51. DfE started to consider the possibility that further education colleges may have to close as part of the response to the pandemic in early February 2020, when the DfE Director of Further Education, Beverley Harrison wrote to Further Education college Principals/Chief Executives on 5 February 2020 seeking their unequivocal agreement and commitment to close colleges in the event of escalation of the coronavirus and for college business continuity plans to be updated. This can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/007 – INQ000613936]**.
52. A draft letter to the Further Education colleges from the DfE Director of Further Education, directing the Further Education colleges to close was prepared on 13 March 2020 should it be required **Exhibit [HC-8/020 – INQ000613951]**. However, this was not issued as the Governing Bodies of the Further Education colleges took the decision to close themselves, as referenced in paragraph 32.
53. DfE met with the Further Education college Principals on 27 February 2020, **Exhibit [HC-8/021 – INQ000613952]** and the impact of Covid-19 was discussed, including the need to update contingency plans, operational and financial difficulties, online learning, college facilities and delivery of training. The following points were noted by the DfE Director of Further Education and the Principals at this meeting regarding considerations of facilities needing to close or staying partially open:
- “Coronavirus – need for all contingency plans and specifically the pandemic section to be updated. Minister has expressed preference for legislative powers to close campuses if necessary. Will need to assess on a regional basis. Potential for around closure rate leading to operational and financial difficulties. Potential to run on-line courses however access to Broadband and hardware sited (sic) as major constraints particularly in Level0/1. Libraries may also be closed which would exacerbate the problem. Concerns raised around delivery of practical training and potential for penalties to be applied for non-delivery (e.g. ESF). Further information will be issued as it is made available.”*
54. Following this meeting, the DfE Director of Further Education wrote to the Further Education college Principals/CEOs on 6 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/022 – INQ000613953]** asking all colleges to provide input into a single list of issues to be considered should the colleges be required to close due to Covid-19.
55. The Further Education colleges submitted a composite list of issues on 12 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/023 – INQ000613954]**. The list of issues included:
- a) the impact of closures on examinations

- b) online delivery of education, with consideration that some learners would not be able to access technology
- c) the impact of closures on students with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD) students.
- d) access to support services if buildings were closed, for example, mental health interventions that students may only receive within colleges

56. This list of issues fed into the principal factors concerning the option of closure of facilities considered in March 2020, which were:

- a) Health and Safety: the potential health risks to students and staff were paramount. DfE evaluated data from health authorities to determine if closures were necessary to prevent virus spread;
- b) International and UK-Wide Precedents: DfE considered actions taken by other regions and countries, such as the UK Department for Education's guidance on maintaining Further Education provision during the pandemic;
- c) Technical infrastructure: DfE liaised with the Further Education colleges on their technological infrastructure and in particular their capability to deliver remote learning was assessed, including the availability of digital platforms and resources;
- d) Student Access and Equity: Consideration was given to students' access to necessary technology and the potential for disparities in learning opportunities;
- e) Support Services Continuity: Ensuring that essential student services, such as counselling and academic support, remained available, whether in-person or virtually; and
- f) Financial Implications: Evaluating the economic impact on institutions and students, including funding adjustments and support mechanisms through the Education Authority.

57. DfE considered the financial impact of Covid-19 on the colleges including the loss of income through student fees, commercial events, business development and the fact that staff costs depend on income generation. On 18 March 2020, DfE Director of Further Education, Beverley Harrison, wrote to the Further Education colleges informing them of mitigations being considered to cover expenditure until the end of the term **Exhibit [HC-8/024 – INQ000613956]**. The letter notes consideration of how DfE staff could work remotely if required and provide prepayments to the colleges for expenditure until June 2020, rather than providing this funding monthly. A prepayment was not then required and monthly funding continued to be facilitated.

58. In addition, DfE met with CCEA on 4 March 2020, the note of meeting is exhibited at **Exhibit [HC-8/025 – INQ000613957]**, to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on examinations/assessments in the event that Colleges and training providers would close. CCEA agreed to issue a letter to the Principals of Further Education colleges seeking assurance they had contingency measures in place, found at Annex A of the note of the meeting exhibited.

Announcement of a national lockdown

59. A national lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on 23 March 2020. Following this, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to move into lockdown in Northern Ireland and the regulations underpinning this were passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 28 March 2020. DfE senior officials and the then Minister for the Economy were not involved in the decision to announce a national lockdown and DfE is not able to comment whether any specific consideration was taken regarding young people attending further education colleges as part of this decision.

60. In February 2020, DfE engaged with DoH and TEO at a Northern Ireland level, and the UK Government, to develop a legislative approach to closure of facilities. At that time, the agreed approach, at official level, was that closures would ultimately be directed under the legislation only on the basis of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) advice.

61. Prior to the announcement of a national lockdown on 23 March 2020, DfE engaged with Further Education Colleges with regards to contingency planning on 5 February 2020, 27 February 2020 and 6 March 2020, as referenced above.

62. Each Further Education college was responsible for its own business continuity planning and the management of incidents. As noted above, DfE was given powers to direct the closure of the institutions, however the Further Education Colleges acted independently.

Advice and guidance to further education institutions during the Specified Period

63. On 6 March 2020 in a letter from the DfE Director of Further Education to the Further Education College Principals/CEOs dated 6 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/022 – INQ000613953]**, DfE shared links to the PHA and Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) guidance websites, with a request for all college staff and students to be advised to keep up to date with the latest guidance which would be regularly updated.

64. In the summer of 2020, DfE developed advice and guidance for the reopening for Further Education in advance of the September 2020 term, known as the Framework for the Safe Resumption for On-site Educational Provision Related Activity (the Framework) **Exhibit [HC-8/011 – INQ000613940]**. The PHA guidance at the time stated that it was the responsibility of individual Further Education Colleges to undertake suitable and sufficient risk assessments and to put measures in place to ensure compliance with the latest PHA guidance and to prioritise the safety of their learners and staff. The framework document was written with a view to assisting the Further Education Colleges to meet these responsibilities.
65. The Framework was developed by DfE in conjunction with AOG, stakeholders from the Further Education Colleges, Non-Statutory Contractors, Trade Unions and advisers including officials from DfE and ETI. AOG obtained, analysed and compiled relevant strategic advice and public health guidance from UK central government, the Northern Ireland Assembly, DoH and PHA regarding matters that impacted the re-opening of the Further Education colleges.
66. The overarching objective of the Framework was ensuring that educational provision and related activity could safely resume for both staff and learners at the earliest opportunity. This included guidance for the Colleges to consider the wellbeing aspects including health and safety and provision of pastoral support, the provision of education, including to vulnerable learners, and the financial implications of any mitigations identified.
67. The Framework document was shared with the Further Education colleges on 19 August 2020, along with a letter from the DfE Deputy Director of Further Education requesting assurances from the Further Education colleges that they had considered the document. The Framework was a live document, which was updated on an ongoing basis as PHA guidance and non-pharmaceutical interventions changed, with version history included to track the changes at each revision. The final version was published in May 2021 and is exhibited at **Exhibit [HC-8/012 – INQ000613941]**.
68. In March 2021, the six Further Education colleges established a joint working-group called Covid-19 Champions Group (the Covid Champions) to address some of the issues raised by the move to on-site learning. A core responsibility for the Covid Champions was ensuring strong communication across the colleges, and ensuring that key public health messages were understood, common practices and approaches, including mask wearing

and PHA advice, were reflected across education sector. The primary interactions DfE had with the Covid Champions were on an ad-hoc basis, for example in relation to the implementation of Lateral Flow Testing on Further Education campuses from April 2021 until February 2023. This was aimed at ensuring the safety of both staff and students.

69. DfE liaised with Further Education colleges on an on-going basis during the Specified Period on the management of outbreaks of Covid-19. In the letter to Further Education colleges dated 6 March 2020, DfE Director of Further Education advised colleges '*Should any instances of COVID-19 occur in your college, you should immediately advise me in line with the agreed protocols*'. It should be noted, however, that the formal process was that any outbreaks would be reported to the PHA in the first instance. DfE commissioned monthly returns from 1 September 2020 to May 2022 to report the number of Covid-19 cases of students and staff attending Further Education colleges. The template of this return is at **Exhibit [HC-8/026 – INQ000613960]**.

Department for Education 'Paper on Higher Education Settings'

70. DfE has been made aware that in February 2021 a Task and Finish Group on Higher Education/Further Education produced a paper entitled '*Paper on Higher Education Settings*' at the request of the Department for Education (England). DfE was not involved in this Task and Finish Group and did not have prior access to this paper.
71. DfE did not have its own data in respect of the epidemiological evidence relating to transmission and severity of Covid-19 in further or higher education settings, however DoH shared advice from the CMO in relation to the non-pharmaceutical interventions agreed by the Executive. The Further Education colleges were responsible for the wellbeing and mental health of young people in further education and the provision of online learning in the place of face-to-face learning.
72. DfE provided support to the Further Education colleges for lost learning and pastoral care. The Further Education colleges provided DfE with a Lost Learning and Pastoral Care business case seeking additional funding on 3 November 2021 **Exhibit [HC-8/027 – INQ000616705]** which outlined a need for additional pastoral care to address the impact of Covid-19 on Further Education students. Funding of £0.5m was requested for the 2021/22 financial year, with £0.2m requested for 2022/23, to provide additional temporary Student Support Welfare Officers to provide wellbeing support to students, direct them to external support services, develop student resilience and assist them to develop

supportive peer networks, additional counselling services and specialist software to assist pastoral care staff to further support students online. A post project evaluation was carried out in May 2024 and detailed the positive impact of the support measures that were funded by DfE and can be found at **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962]**.

73. In June 2020, the AOG issued a survey to learners, referred to in more detail below at paragraph 77, in Further Education colleges to seek their views on returning to campus and face to face learning in September 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/030 – INQ000613963]**. The results of this survey showed that students wanted to return to the campus and were open to blended learning (a mix of in person and remote learning). The surveys also showed the students wanted access to support services including libraries, careers advice and financial support.

74. DfE met with NUS-USI (National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland) on 29 July 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/031 – INQ000613965]**. The purpose of the meeting was to gain feedback on the results of the Learner Survey, but also to understand any other concerns which may have been raised by learners and not captured effectively within the survey results.

75. Following the meeting noted above, DfE requested that the Further Education colleges provide comments on the outcome of the survey and the feedback received from the meeting with NUS-USI. Following this, the Further Education colleges provided their comments at **Exhibit [HC-8/031 – INQ000613965]** and advised of a number of initiatives that they had implemented to support students in this area including a Wellbeing and Resilience Framework, a working action plan for Health and Wellbeing entitled '*Repair, Recovery and Reestablish Connection*', additional counselling services available from *Inspire* alongside *Inspire's* self-guided online tool. Each college implemented these support measures and would be best placed to provide further details. DfE continued to hold Further Education colleges to account for their performance against their Key Performance Indicators by the processes outlined in paragraph 24 above.

Monitoring and assessment of the impact of the pandemic in respect of Further Education

76. Throughout the Specified Period DfE continued to assess student numbers and performance of the Further Education colleges in terms of retention rate, achievement rate

and success rate under normal oversight and reporting mechanisms, as referred to in the paragraphs above.

77. The Learner Survey referenced in paragraph 73 above was commissioned by the Advisory Oversight Group (AOG) and administered by Northern Regional College prior to 24 July 2020. The key findings of this were shared with the Chair of the Principals group **Exhibits [HC-8/030 – INQ000613963, HC-8/032 - INQ000613966]** and were incorporated into the DfE led Framework for the Safe Resumption of on-site Educational Provision and Related Activity.

78. One of the key findings of the survey was the impact that a lack of IT had on learners. The findings stated:

"it is recognised that the Further Education sector has a disproportionately high number of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, a higher-than-average number of learners with vulnerabilities such as special education, health or social care needs and a proportion of learners from BAME backgrounds. Due to this, there is more imperative for FE to be able to support learners with IT equipment at home."

79. DfE successfully bid for funding from the Executive of £1.1m in June 2020 for the provision of laptops and IT equipment for learners in Further Education colleges within the period of lockdown and beyond. This funding was provided to the Further Education colleges in September 2020 and followed up with a further £6.5m for IT support for staff and students plus a Digital Poverty scheme from September 2020 to February 2021. **Exhibit [HC-8/033 – INQ000613967].**

80. In line with Managing Public Money NI (MPMNI) guidelines, a post project evaluation (PPE) was undertaken for the Digital Poverty scheme **Exhibit [HC-8/034 – INQ000613969]** and records the positive outcome of this intervention. In addition, Post Project Evaluations were also provided to DfE by the Further Education Colleges outlining the positive outcome of the Lost Learning/Curriculum support and Pastoral Care interventions for FE and HE Curriculum in May 2024 **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962].**

Differential impact in respect of further education

81. DfE did not undertake any specific work to assess the impact on students with disabilities, those in care, or those with neurodivergence. The responsibility for this lay with the Further Education colleges, who were responsible for the monitoring of student welfare and the impact of Covid-19 on them. The Further Education colleges identified how learners were affected in terms of lost learning and additional pastoral care requirements and bid to DfE for additional funding to address same.
82. The colleges identified in the Lost Learning/Curriculum support and Pastoral Care interventions for FE and HE Curriculum that one of the impacts of lost learning was “*some of the most disadvantaged students may withdraw and/or be required to repeat a full academic year*”, among other risks. The additional funding provided by DfE allowed the Colleges to implement additional measures to address these risks and provide additional teaching and support to students. Positive outcomes of the interventions funded by DfE were reported through Post Project Evaluations **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962]**.

Attainment in respect of further education

83. DfE did not undertake any specific work to assess the impact on students’ educational attainment during the Specified Period. The responsibility for this lay with the Further Education colleges, who were responsible for the monitoring of student welfare and the impact of Covid-19 on them. The Further Education colleges identified how learners were affected in terms of lost learning and additional pastoral care requirements and bid to DfE for additional funding to address same.
84. The colleges identified that the impacts of lost learning included “some of the most disadvantaged students may withdraw and/or be required to repeat a full academic year” and “reduction in learner motivation, attendance and retention”, among other risks. The additional funding provided by DfE allowed the Colleges to implement additional measures to address these risks and provide additional teaching and support to students. Positive outcomes of the interventions funded by DfE were reported through Post Project Evaluations **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962]**.

Access to technology in respect of further education

85. In the June 2020 Monitoring Round, DfE allocated additional funding to Further Education Colleges to facilitate the purchase of additional information technology (IT) equipment, peripherals and licences to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students and help address the challenge of reducing IT poverty **Exhibit [HC-8/035 – INQ000613970]**.
86. During the 2020/21 financial year, this included providing almost 1,200 SIM cards to staff and students. £1.1m was initially allocated to colleges specifically for IT and to facilitate remote access in September 2020, with a further £3.7m allocated in December 2020 for Covid-related IT purposes; and then a further £2.7m allocated specifically to fund a payment of £60 to eligible further education students (full time and part time) to address Digital Poverty in February 2021 **Exhibits [HC-8/033 – INQ000613967, HC-8/036 – INQ000613971]**.
87. A Post Project Evaluation (PPE) was produced by the Further Education colleges and shared with DfE on the impact of the Digital Poverty intervention in May 2022 **Exhibit [HC-8/034 – INQ000613969]**. Both the Business Case **Exhibit [HC-8/036 – INQ000613971]** and the PPE provide an assessment of the need for this intervention despite the mitigations already put in place by further education colleges and additionally funded by DfE during the 2020/21 financial year.
88. DfE allocated additional funding of £2.9m for additional curriculum support and pastoral care in November 2021 to address the education and mental health of students (further education, those studying higher education in further education colleges and those transferring from post-primary) which colleges had identified as negatively impacted by the pandemic. Further education college business cases received by DfE in respect of these provided an assessment of impact of the pandemic on students attending further education colleges to support their additional funding requirement **Exhibits [HC-8/037 – INQ000613972, HC-8/038 – INQ000616706, HC-8/027 – INQ000616705, HC-8/039 – INQ000613977, HC-8/040 – INQ000613978]**.
89. DfE is not aware of any assessment internally which established that the provision of technology to further education students was delayed or less effective compared to higher education students. Additional curriculum support and pastoral care provision reflected additional support provided to Higher Education students in Northern Ireland, and those

undertaking higher education courses within further education colleges were eligible for the same £500 Covid Study Disruption payments as higher education students.

90. As outlined above, additional funding was provided to further education colleges for IT support for staff and students and also to support additional curriculum support and pastoral care for further education students which commenced in the 2020/21 academic year and continued into the 2022/23 financial year. Business cases received by DfE from the further education colleges identified the impact and the need for intervention, with a post project evaluation received in May 2024 outlining the success of the intervention **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962].**

Employment and future prospects in respect of Further Education

91. DfE did not undertake any specific work to assess the impact on students' long-term employability and future prospects. The responsibility for this lay with the Further Education colleges, who were responsible for the monitoring of student attendance, retention and achievement and the impact of Covid-19 on them. The Further Education colleges identified how learners were affected in terms of lost learning and additional pastoral care requirements and bid to DfE for additional funding to address same.
92. The colleges identified in the Lost Learning/Curriculum support and Pastoral Care interventions for FE and HE Curriculum that the impacts of lost learning included "*A generation of learners who have lost out because of gaps in education. Without immediate support for colleges, to allow Students to get the access to the curriculum they need, we risk restricting the life chances of young people for years to come*" and "*fears around future job security*", among other risks. The additional funding provided by DfE allowed the Colleges to implement additional measures to address these risks and provide additional teaching and support to students. Positive outcomes of the interventions funded by DfE were reported through Post Project Evaluations **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962].**

Mental health and wellbeing

93. DfE did not undertake any specific work to assess the impact on students' mental health and wellbeing. The responsibility for this lay with the Further Education colleges, who were responsible for the monitoring of student wellbeing and the impact of Covid-19 on them. The Further Education colleges identified how learners were affected in terms of lost

learning and additional pastoral care requirements and bid to DfE for additional funding to address same.

94. The colleges identified in the Lost Learning/Curriculum support and Pastoral Care interventions for FE and HE Curriculum that the impacts of lost learning included *“Increased incidences of poor mental health and well-being”* and *“students feeling isolated and lonely when learning online and missing interaction with teachers and fellow students”* among other impacts. The additional funding provided by DfE allowed the Colleges to implement additional measures to address these impacts including additional pastoral care, wellbeing officers and counselling services. Positive outcomes of the interventions funded by DfE were reported through Post Project Evaluations **Exhibits [HC-8/028 – INQ000613961, HC-8/029 – INQ000613962]**.

Enrolment numbers in respect of Further Education

95. The Further Education Sector Activity Bulletin **Exhibit [HC-8/041 – INQ000641998]**, which DfE publishes yearly, provides an overview of the trends in learners in Further Education colleges and is accompanied by published statistical tables.
96. The number of learners enrolled at Further Education colleges decreased by 7.6% from the 2018/19 academic year (76,670) to 2019/20 (70,845). There was then a significant decrease in learner numbers from 2019/20 to 2020/21 (55,970) of 21%. There were increases in the subsequent years of 10.2% (from 2020/21 to 2021/22) and 14.3% (from 2020/21 to 2022/23).
97. As referenced in paragraph 73 above, research was undertaken in June 2020 via a survey of 9,172 students and applicants regarding their colleges' support and views on returning to in-person learning **Exhibit [HC-8/030 – INQ000613963]**. The survey was sent with the purpose of determining how students who were enrolled or enrolling in September 2020 felt about coming on to campus at the Further Education colleges. The survey results identified that students were most concerned about maintaining social distancing on campus (48% raised concern) and using shared equipment (34%). To a lesser extent, students also identified using public transport to access their college (25%), access to hand sanitisation (23%), IT equipment at home (19%) and placements with employers (9%) as other key issues. The research included four recommendations on guidance for shared equipment, guidance on using public transport, funding for IT equipment for learners, and liaison with employers regarding placements.

98. The six Further Education colleges established a joint working-group, Covid Champions, to address some of the issues raised by the move to on-site learning. The first recorded meeting of this group was on 24 March 2021. A core responsibility for the Covid Champions was ensuring strong communication across the colleges, ensuring that key Public Health messages were understood, common practices and approaches, including mask wearing and PHA advice were reflected across the sector. Further to this the Covid Champions implemented and promoted lateral flow testing on Further Education college campuses to reduce the risk to the college community and manage the unpredictability of asymptomatic Covid-19. The Covid Champions also liaised with the PHA to promote the Covid-19 vaccination and for on-campus vaccine mobile units for the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic term.
99. A follow-up survey in December 2020 found higher satisfaction rates amongst students for learning either fully, or mainly, on campus. In the second survey, using public transport and maintaining social distancing were the main concerns.
100. On 29 June 2023, analysis was undertaken by DfE and shared with the Permanent Secretary **Exhibit [HC-8/042 – INQ000613980]**. The research showed the number of students not going to Further Education colleges was because individuals were diverted to schools or Higher Education. This paper estimated that 1,310 students were diverted from Further Education to Higher Education. This trend would likely have been impacted by grade inflation during the pandemic. Since this, DfE has put out marketing campaigns to further encourage Further Education participation.

Lessons Learned in respect of Further Education

101. On 20 September 2022, DfE launched two surveys (Student Survey and Provider Survey) with a view to gaining valuable feedback on DfE's response to the Covid-19 pandemic for the Further Education sector, the surveys were drawn up with input from the Covid Champions.
102. The Student Survey was sent to students at Further Education colleges **Exhibit [HC-8/043 – INQ000613981]** and received 299 responses, which equates to 0.5% of the number of students in the 2021/22 academic year. The Provider Survey, which was aimed at Further Education college staff, tutors, Trade Unions, training organisations and DfE staff, **Exhibit [HC-8/044 – INQ000613982]** received 434 responses. DfE produced

documents of the key findings of both surveys at **Exhibits [HC-8/045 – INQ000613983, HC-8/046 – INQ000613986]** respectively.

103. The Student Survey found that 40% of students responding to the survey were aware of the payment of free school meals to households of eligible school-age children in Further Education. This is not surprising as this was paid automatically and there was no application process. However, 40% of respondents were not aware of any of the available support packages, during a time when there was potentially a greater need for support.
104. Over 70% of students who responded were aware that lateral flow tests were available on Further Education premises with 42% of students stating that they had availed of the tests. Nearly 65% of the total student respondents rated the DfE response to Covid-19 in Further Education colleges as Good or Above with 14% rating the response as Poor.
105. Students were asked to provide reasons for their answers. The majority of the answers were related to what the students were experiencing in Further Education colleges and training providers rather than DfE.
106. DfE concluded in its key findings of the Student Survey **Exhibit [HC-8/045 – INQ000613983]** that *“Overall the results of this survey show that the students who returned to face-to-face learning felt safe on the campus and welcomed the Covid-19 mitigations that were put in place. There is however an opportunity to improve the communication and awareness of the student support that is available, ensuring more students have the opportunity to avail of it and in so improve their opportunities to remain in education and complete their course.”*
107. The Further Education Provider's survey asked questions on a number of Covid related subjects including the Framework Document, what respondents saw as the biggest impact of Covid-19 on the Further Education sector, communication, the support packages put in place by DfE and what DfE could have done better. In the area of communication 51% gave a rating between Good and Excellent, whereas 15% responded that communication was poor, for those who rated it poor the timing of communication was a factor. 17% of all respondents who gave an answer to the question on what could have been done to alleviate the impact of Covid-19 felt that there should have been a return to face-to-face learning sooner, especially for courses with a practical element.

108. Respondents also challenged the reason behind schools being able to open when Further Education colleges had to remain closed. The impact to mental health was another area that was highlighted that actions should have been taken to reduce the impact, however the highest response to this was “do nothing”, with some respondents stating it was an unprecedented situation.

109. DfE concluded in its key findings of the Providers Survey **Exhibit [HC-8/046 – INQ000613986]** that *“With an overall percentage rating of 67% it would be fair to say that the response by the DfE to the Covid-19 pandemic for the FE sector was seen as positive. Given the velocity of the Covid-19 pandemic it is reasonable to expect that there were opportunities for improvement, as decisions were taken quickly and there was a need to implement resulting actions in noticeably short time periods.”*

110. The points identified in the above document by DfE as areas for future consideration were:

- a) Digital strategy
- b) Mandatory training for tutors/lecturers;
- c) Development of Blended learning;
- d) Social development of young people after Covid;
- e) Effective communication of support packages;
- f) Communication strategy for unique events;
- g) Impact of grade inflation and success rates of Further Education/Higher Education or training; and
- h) Hybrid working in Further Education Sector.

Section 2 – Higher Education

Roles and Responsibilities in respect of Higher Education

111. DfE is responsible for administering funding and setting the strategic direction of higher education in Northern Ireland.

112. The Higher Education Institutions (“HEIs”) within Northern Ireland are:

- a) Queen’s University Belfast
- b) Ulster University
- c) The Open University
- d) St Mary’s University College

e) Stranmillis University College

113. DfE has a duty to promote education stemming from Article 3 of the Education (Reform) (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. It is important to note, however, that the Higher Education Institutions, with the exception of Stranmillis University College which is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), are autonomous bodies and therefore are responsible for their own policies, practices and processes.

114. In support of the provision of higher education in Northern Ireland, DfE provides significant funding each year to the higher education institutions. Higher education is also funded and delivered through the six regional Further Education colleges.

115. While the universities are autonomous bodies, with many funding streams, their allocations from DfE in recent years were made in the context of the following aims:

- a) to enhance universities' research capabilities and research quality;
- b) to support the universities in achieving long-term sustainability;
- c) to exploit fully the contribution which the universities can make to the economy and, in particular, to increase their responsiveness to the needs of business and the community;
- d) to increase participation and widen access, particularly from groups who are under-represented in higher education;
- e) to improve quality and standards of teaching and learning alongside promoting greater flexibility in delivery;
- f) to ensure effective governance of all the universities' affairs.

116. The higher education institutions operate under the provisions of their existing charters' policies relating to the wellbeing, learning and attainment and provision of education of their student body. St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College are academically recognised as university colleges of the Queen's University of Belfast. Queen's University of Belfast has overarching responsibility for academic quality and standards and validates the courses offered by both institutions.

117. The Education Student Fees (Approved Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 require that all Higher Education Institutions wishing to charge more than the basic higher education fee for any course must provide a Widening Access and Participation Plan (WAPP) for DfE's approval. Since 2013, Higher Education Institutions have been required to produce WAPPs to address under-represented groups in Higher Education, in particular

students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities (physical, sensory and learning), adult returners and care experienced.

118. Higher Education is delivered by the local universities and the Further Education colleges (HE in FE). HE in FE serves an economic purpose but also a social purpose, as Further Education colleges significantly increase opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate, making HE in FE a key contributor to the overall vision of DfE. The WAPPs are approved by DfE and published on each institutional website.
119. WAPPs provide a summary of the institution's Widening Participation strategy, observations on the institution's past achievement against regional benchmarks and a detailed programme of anticipated progress each year towards the institution's own targets. The WAPP includes details of the activities that institutions will undertake to promote widening participation in higher education through outreach work, financial support to students, retention activity and relevant research.
120. DfE currently requires all higher education providers to spend a minimum of 10% of additional fee income on widening participation. As part of the WAPP process, DfE also requires commentary from the recognised student body at each of the institutions.
121. The Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (the 2005 Order) put in place a system of variable tuition fees in Northern Ireland, and the requirement for Higher Education Institutions charging those fees to prepare widening access plans. This Order also provides a definition of publicly funded institutions in Northern Ireland for the purposes of fees policy, as comprising the two universities, the two university colleges and the six recognised further education colleges. The powers to set fee caps in the 2005 Order are exercised annually, most recently through the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.
122. DfE does not have responsibility for disputes relating to tuition fees, as they are a contractual matter between student and provider and DfE advises that students should discuss any issues with the institution and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman if necessary.
123. DfE also does not have responsibility over young people's accommodation whilst they are attending higher education. The Department for Communities (DfC) has responsibility

for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and the Private Rental Sector (PRS). University-managed accommodation is normally a commercial matter for the institutions as accommodation rental agreements are between the student and the university.

124. Unlike other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has no dedicated higher education funding council; DfE acts as a government department and a funding council and holds responsibilities relating to both.

125. A list of the relevant legislation relating to Higher Education, which applied prior to and during the specified period can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/047 – INQ000613989]**.

126. DfE's primary liaison is with the Higher Education Institutions themselves. DfE officials have cultivated strong working relationships with each of the five publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and during the pandemic engaged closely with each. During the specified period, DfE's relationship and responsibilities in relation to the Higher Education Institutions remained, however in addition, DfE was given additional powers through the Coronavirus Act 2020 which received Royal Assent on 25 March 2020, including powers to close Higher Education Institutions. This power was not used by DfE during the specified period, as the Higher Education Institutions made the decision to close independently in March 2020. DfE also provided additional Covid-19 funding to support the Higher Education Institutions during the specified period.

127. DfE liaises with a number of other organisations in relation to Higher Education, including:

- a) The Universities & College Admissions Services (UCAS) – relating to the UK admissions processes and data regarding higher education enrolments;
- b) Student Loan Company (SLC) – in relation to the payments to students and universities of student loans;
- c) The National Union of Students Northern Ireland – Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) – in relation to higher education students; and
- d) The six Northern Ireland Further Education colleges – relating to matters on Higher Education in Further Education courses.

128. A list of Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs)/Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)/charities with whom DfE engages with in respect to Higher Education, can be found at **Exhibit [HC-8/048 – INQ000613990]**.

129. DfE liaises with the Department of Health (DoH) in relation to Medicine and Allied Health Courses in Higher Education Institutions. Responsibility for commissioning medical, dental and social work student places rests with DoH. Each year, DoH officials advise DfE of any changes to these student numbers and the appropriate adjustments are made to the Higher Education Institutions recurrent grant allocations, which is paid to the Higher Education Institutions by DfE. Funding of these student places is through a combination of DfE baseline budget, DoH in-year budget technical transfers and NI Executive budget allocations. It should be noted that funding for Allied Health Profession (AHP) and Nursing/Midwifery courses is paid to the Higher Education Institutions directly by DoH. Prior to 2024/25, DfE had no role in the funding of AHP places.
130. DfE also liaises with the Department of Education (DE) in relation to workforce planning around Initial Teacher Education. The Higher Education Institutions provide courses for Initial Teacher Education, encompassing undergraduate and postgraduate courses that lead to a qualification to teach. DE is responsible for the policy and student intake allocations, with the funding for places being provided by DfE.
131. DfE liaises with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) as the department with lead responsibility for the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). Liaison relates to issues of common interest; for example, while tuition fees for higher education students at CAFRE are not dealt with in legislation governing higher education institutions generally, there is a commitment that CAFRE fees will align with the position in the wider sector.

Role of DfE in relation to decisions pertaining to young people accessing higher education during the specified period

132. Throughout the specified period, DfE had a role acting as a liaison for the Higher Education Institutions and provided advice to the Executive notably around the imposition/non-imposition of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). During the specified period many of the decisions relating to accessing higher education were taken by the Higher Education Institutes themselves and the Northern Ireland Executive, of which the Economy Minister was part. The Northern Ireland Executive agreed legislative requirements for NPIs. In addition to business-as-usual operations, DfE also designed and implemented a number of measures aimed at supporting students in Higher Education, as outlined below.

Decisions relating to access to educational facilities

133. In February 2020, a decision was taken to include a power in the Coronavirus legislation providing that the DfE may direct closure of the Higher Education Institutions if deemed necessary **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**.

134. In March 2020, while the Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and responsible for their own operational decisions including the recruitment of international students, the Economy Minister took the decision for the early conclusion of the Study USA Programme (a DfE-funded programme) for 2019/2020, returning students home from studying abroad in colleges in the United States **Exhibit [HC-8/049 – INQ000613991]**.

Provision of additional funding to Higher Education Institutions

135. Other significant decisions made by the Economy Minister following advice and briefings from officials were focused on the need to provide financial support to both the Higher Education Institutions and Higher Education students.

136. In June 2020, following briefing from DfE officials, the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds agreed to £2.8m of additional student support funds/hardship funds to the Higher Education Institutions for distribution to students in financial hardship **Exhibit [HC-8/050 – INQ000613992]**.

137. In July 2020 and November 2021, DfE provided £3.1m funding to the Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University to allow extensions to the student funding provided to affected final-year Postgraduate Award Scheme students in 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 **Exhibit [HC-8/051 – INQ000613993]**.

138. On 9 February 2021, the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, gave a Ministerial direction for a Covid Disruption Payment, providing a one-off £500 payment to every student from the UK or EU enrolled on a full-time higher education course in Northern Ireland. **Exhibit [HC-8/052 – INQ000613994]**.

139. On 11 February 2021, following briefing from officials, the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, agreed to allow students to continue to be treated as in-attendance on courses and to receive the full package of support to which they were entitled prior to the pandemic, including continuing to receive the appropriate support for living away from home, where

applicable, even if residing at home due to restrictions on movement **Exhibit [HC-8/053 – INQ000613995]**.

140. In March 2021, a package was distributed by DfE to universities to fund additional student hardship support **Exhibit [HC-8/054 – INQ000613996]**. A total of £37.7m was provided to the Higher Education Institutions including:

- a) £22m of funding to cover the Covid Disruption Payment, referred to in paragraph 138 above;
- b) £8.5m of funding to address digital poverty, fund mental health support through the Higher Education Institutions' respective Student Unions and support widening participation for students;
- c) £4.1m of funding for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- d) £3.1m of funding to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

141. In July 2021, following briefing from officials, the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, agreed to the Higher Education Transitional Experience Initiative to provide funding to tackle incoming students' learning deficits due to the pandemic for the 2021 academic year intake **Exhibit [HC-8/055 – INQ000614000]**.

Pre-pandemic planning in respect of Higher Education

142. In late 2018 to early 2019, DfE engaged with the Department for Education in England (DfE England) **Exhibit [HC-8/016 – INQ000613945]** and DoH and The Executive Office (TEO) **Exhibit [HC-8/017 – INQ000613946]** on the Draft Pandemic Influenza (Emergency) Bill in regard to the power to close Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions during an emergency.

143. DfE considered the necessity of powers to close the educational establishments and on 31 October 2018 the then Permanent Secretary of DfE, Noel Lavery, wrote to the Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions, noting that DfE considered the powers to be a last resort option and noting that the institutions had contingency procedures in place that included the closure of institutions if required **Exhibit [HC-8/018 – INQ000613949]**. The letter sought unequivocal agreement and commitment from each institution to close in the event of such a pandemic. DfE subsequently received this

unequivocal agreement from all institutions and did not add any clauses to the draft bill. The draft was not subsequently enacted.

144. In February 2020, there was engagement involving DoH and TEO at a local level and the UK Government to develop a legislative approach to closure of facilities in response to Covid-19. On 17 February 2020, DfE officials advised the Minister's office that the intention was to include clauses granting DfE powers to close the Further Education colleges and Higher Education Institutions as a precautionary measure. The Minister for the Economy wrote to the Minister of Health on 27 February 2020 confirming she had agreed to this draft clause being included in the UK Coronavirus Bill **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**.

145. These powers were not used however, as the Higher Education Institutions made the decision to close themselves in March 2020.

146. Within DfE there were Business Continuity Plans (BCP) in place prior to January 2020 to provide guidance in the event of a disruption to normal business from unexpected or unforeseen events or as a result of any major incidents, including pandemics. BCPs are created at a divisional level, with each of the seven divisions of the Skills and Education Group (SEG) preparing and maintaining their own BCP.

147. The Higher Education Division BCP identified risks to business critical functions of the Division, and set out procedures for ensuring the continuity of, or minimising disruption to, these functions.

148. As autonomous bodies, each of the Higher Education Institutions were responsible for their own BCPs and DfE requested sight of these on 3 February 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/056 – INQ000614001]**.

Decision making in respect of higher education

The initial response to the pandemic (January – March 2020)

149. Between January and March 2020, as the COVID-19 situation evolved, DfE considered various sources of advice and factors to guide Higher Education Institutions. The primary source of advice was public health guidance. DfE closely monitored updates from the Public Health Agency (PHA) to assess the safety of keeping educational facilities

open. This included evaluating transmission rates and implementing recommended health measures.

150. Higher Education Institution closures were first considered in February 2020, when there was engagement involving DoH and TEO, at a local level, and the UK Government to develop a legislative approach to closure of facilities in response to Covid-19. On 17 February 2020, DfE officials advised the Minister's office that the intention was to include clauses granting DfE powers to close the Higher Education Institutions as a precautionary measure. The Minister for the Economy wrote to the Minister of Health on 27 February 2020 confirming she had agreed to this draft clause being included in the UK Coronavirus Bill **Exhibit [HC-8/008 – INQ000613937]**.

151. Scoping work by DfE officials in relation to the UK-wide Coronavirus Bill included consideration of flexibility which would facilitate closures on a campus-by-campus basis if feasible. However, this scoping was limited as officials very much operated under the view that public health advice would be the key determinant underpinning decision-making, and that any decisions around the ability of Higher Education Institutions to stay open (whether fully or partially) would be taken on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer.

152. DfE is not aware of any specific advice provided on the effect that closing higher education facilities might have on the transmission of Covid-19 in the community. Advice at the time suggested that the transmission of the virus could be minimised by restricting contact.

153. Between January and March 2020, the key discussions taking place between officials across government and with Higher Education Institution representatives were about preventing the transmission of Covid-19 to protect the population generally and the potential closures of the institutions.

154. In March 2020, DfE compiled an assessment of the key areas of concern regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, which was sent to TEO for compilation across the NICS. The Higher Education Division's input referenced course disruption as a consequence of potential closures, resulting in increased institutional costs and students possibly having to repeat courses or re-sit exams and therefore demanding compensation. Inclusion of an indemnity clause in proposed emergency legislation was being considered by way of mitigation, and it was understood that there would be a need to review a range of policy

positions on the funding of teaching, research and student support **Exhibit [HC-8/057 – INQ000614002]**.

155. Provision of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), requiring face-to-face engagement, was also considered by officials to be a risk in a briefing dated 12 March 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/058 – INQ000614003]**. Under normal circumstances DSA Needs Assessments and 1:1 Non-medical Help had traditionally been provided on a face to face basis, but in light of social distancing protocols, and the need to ensure the continued delivery of support, the decision was taken to enable the universities and colleges to make DSA Needs Assessments and Non-medical Help available to students remotely **Exhibit [HC-8/059 – INQ000614004]**. This was communicated through the DSA Operational Group, comprising representatives from each of the universities, colleges and the Education Authority, and guidance was updated to reflect the flexible approach.

156. On 3 February 2020 DfE wrote to the Higher Education Institutions requesting sight of their individual contingency plans for a pandemic flu outbreak **Exhibit [HC-8/056 – INQ000614001]**. Subsequently on 9 March 2020 the Permanent Secretary wrote to the institutions seeking:

- a) an update on contingency plans,
- b) specific measures for Easter break,
- c) measures to mitigate impact on exams, and
- d) daily updates on the number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 at Higher Education Institution **Exhibit [HC-8/060 – INQ000614005]**.

157. The Higher Education Institutions, as autonomous institutions responsible for their own operational planning, were responsible for continuous assessment of the rapidly developing public health situation and developing appropriate contingency plans on the delivery of education in the event of closures.

158. The Universities, as autonomous institutions responsible for their own policies and procedures, acted independently in their decisions to close in March 2020.

Announcement of a national lockdown

159. A national lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on 23 March 2020. Following this, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to move into lockdown in Northern Ireland and the regulations underpinning this were passed by the Northern

Ireland Assembly on 28 March 2020. DfE Senior Officials and the former Minister for the Economy were not involved in the decision to announce a national lockdown and DfE is not able to comment whether any specific consideration was taken regarding young people attending Higher Education Institutions as part of this decision. However, the Higher Education Institutions had already made the decision to close prior to the national lockdown being announced.

160. University accommodation, as an operational matter for the universities, was not a topic considered in initial thinking about university closures by DfE.

161. Throughout the specified period, DfE engaged with the Higher Education Institutions and NUS-USI to understand the impacts of a range of operational issues including in respect of accommodation. DfE acted as a conduit, directing universities to the relevant contacts in DoH, PHA and to DfC where advice on assistance for those self-isolating in rented accommodation and accessing food/healthcare was devised **Exhibit [HC-8/061 – INQ000614006]**. DfE officials also liaised with NUS-USI to ensure that the advice for students, delivered by PHA/DoH, was appropriate and targeted **Exhibit [HC-8/062 – INQ000614007]**.

162. Prior to the announcement of a national lockdown on 23 March 2020, DfE engaged with Higher Education Institutions with regards to contingency planning on 3 February 2020 and 9 March 2020, as referenced above.

163. The Higher Education Institutions, as autonomous bodies, were responsible for their own operational arrangements including the delivery of their services in the event of closure. As noted in paragraphs above, DfE was given powers to direct the closure of the institutions, however the Higher Education Institutions acted independently.

164. However, prior to the closures, DfE considered the risks and impact of the pandemic on young people attending Higher Education Institutions, as noted in risk documents dated 3 March 2020 and 12 March 2020 **Exhibits [HC-8/057 – INQ000614002, HC-8/058 – INQ000614003]**. These documents focused particularly on the practical impacts of funding and financial implications of closures. Once the closures were implemented, DfE worked with the Higher Education Institutions and Student Bodies to address the impacts.

165. As referenced in above, DfE liaised with the Higher Education Institutions in February and March 2020 to share PHA advice and requesting the Higher Education Institutions to

update their contingency planning documents, however no guidance or directions were given in respect of decisions made to close university facilities or suspend face-to-face teaching in March 2020.

Advice and guidance to higher education institutions during the specified period

166. Throughout the Specified Period, DfE acted as an information conduit in relation to guidance, sharing relevant information from TEO and PHA with the Higher Education Institutions as and when required. Guidance originating from the UK Government and local Department of Health and Public Health Agency was circulated by DfE to Higher Education Institutions with a view to wider circulation to staff and students. The focus of the guidance initially was on preventing the spread of the virus.

- a) 3 February 2020: DfE shared a link to UK Government guidance to the Higher Education Institutions sharing the latest health advice on Covid-19 at that time. The email also requested the Higher Education Institutions to detail any contingency plans. The Higher Education Institutions all wrote back to confirm their plans and indicated they were monitoring the Public Health Guidance from UK Gov and PHA **Exhibits [HC-8/063 – INQ000614008, HC-8/064 – INQ000614009, HC-8/056 – INQ000614001, HC-8/065 – INQ000614010, HC-8/066 – INQ000614011]**.
- b) 10 February 2020: Posters provided by DfE England were circulated to Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland. These advised those who had been in particular parts of China to avoid work and public transport, and advised Higher Education Institutions that the overall COVID risk was moderate and included UK Government advice on travel and self-isolation **Exhibits [HC-8/067 – INQ000614012, HC-8/068 – INQ000614038]**.
- c) 4 November 2020: DfE created a signposting document collating links to existing guidance from UK Government and PHA for publication on the NI Direct website, specifically in relation to students in Higher Education. The advice included within this document was not drafted by DfE, rather the links acted as a signpost to the advice. The document was sense-checked by the Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions before publication. **Exhibit [HC-8/069 – INQ000614039]**.
- d) 6 November 2020: DfE kept NUS-USI updated on the guidance documents and advice available and following the publication of the signposting document on NI Direct, sent an email containing links to various pieces of guidance for Higher

Education and Further Education students **Exhibit [HC-8/070 – INQ000614040]**.

- e) 10 November 2020: DfE drafted guidance for student travel at Christmas based on DfE England guidance. This was provided as an initial draft and sent to Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) to assist them in working with the PHA to develop appropriate guidance. DfE undertook the initial draft of the document given the time sensitive nature of the need to provide such guidance. Higher Education Institutions were informed that DfE could not agree and publish public health guidance and Higher Education Institutions should work with the PHA to draft and finalise any such guidance **Exhibits [HC-8/071 – INQ000614041, HC-8/072 – INQ000614043]**.
- f) 22 January 2021: Following the Office for Students (OfS) writing to universities and colleges in England regarding their ongoing responsibilities to students, the Minister for the Economy agreed to write letters to the Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions. DfE issued letters to Higher Education Institutions reminding them of their duty to support students, the financial support initiated by DfE and the Higher Education Institutions' need to meet obligations of consumer law **Exhibits [HC-8/073 – INQ000616707, HC-8/074 – INQ000614044, HC-8/075 – INQ000614045, HC-8/076 – INQ000614046, HC-8/077 – INQ000614047, HC-8/078 – INQ000614048]**.
- g) 1 October 2021: DfE wrote a letter issued to the Higher Education Institutions in response to queries regarding the Executive's 'work from home' messaging and how it could operationally impact on returning to campus and face to face teaching **Exhibit [HC-8/079 – INQ000614049]**.

167. In April 2020, DfE engaged with UCAS, the Office for Students, the Department for Education (UK) and each of the UK administrations to deal with concerns about admissions/placement offers to Higher Education Institutions in light of the need to use predicted exam results (substituted exam results) for the purposes of admitting applicants to the institutions. UCAS introduced a moratorium on admissions and letters were issued to the Higher Education Institutions on 6 April 2020 following agreement from the Minister advising them of the discussions between DfE and the Devolved Administrations **Exhibits [HC-8/080 – INQ000614050, HC-8/081 – INQ000614051, HC-8/082 – INQ000614052, HC-8/083 – INQ000614053]**. Guidance was not issued on the subject, rather, DfE worked collaboratively to ensure that concerns about arrangements in the rest of the UK that could act to the detriment of Northern Ireland institutional recruitment and financial stability were

addressed. These offers were considered to have the potential to impact on applications to local Higher Education Institutions.

168. DfE continually liaised with the Higher Education Institutions in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions including providing financial support to the Higher Education Institutions for a safer learning environment, as noted in paragraph 173 below.

169. DfE wrote to the Higher Education Institutions on 9 March 2020 seeking daily updates on the number of cases of Covid-19 at their institutions and the action taken **Exhibit [HC-8/060 – INQ000614005]**. Responses were logged, as received internally by DfE. On 26 March 2020, DfE advised Higher Education Institutions that these updates were no longer required as the institutions were closed **Exhibit [HC-8/084 – INQ000614054]**. It should be noted, however, that the formal process was that any outbreaks would be reported to the PHA in the first instance.

Department for Education ‘Paper on Higher Education Settings’

170. DfE has been made aware that in February 2021 a Task and Finish Group on Higher Education/Further Education produced a paper entitled, ‘*Paper on Higher Education Settings*’ at the request of the Department for Education (England). DfE was not involved in this Task and Finish Group and did not have prior access to this paper.

171. DfE did not have its own data in respect of the epidemiological evidence relating to transmission and severity of Covid-19 in further or higher education settings, however DoH shared advice from the CMO in relation to the non-pharmaceutical interventions agreed by the Executive. The Higher Education Institutions were responsible for the wellbeing and mental health of young people in higher education and the provision of online learning in place of face-to-face learning.

172. However, in March 2021, DfE implemented a scheme aimed at supporting the Universities to provide a safe learning environment and funding for Higher Education Institutions to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to deliver mental health support through their respective students’ unions. The Higher Education Institutions submitted proposals to DfE of what more could be provided by way of student support. These costed proposed interventions were reviewed by DfE and funding was allocated to the Higher Education Institutions **Exhibit [HC-8/054 – INQ000613996]**. Letters informing the Higher Education Institutions about their funding allocations were sent to each on 29

March 2021 **Exhibits [HC-8/085 – INQ000614055, HC-8/086 – INQ000614056, HC-8/087 – INQ000614057, HC-8/088 – INQ000614058]**.

Students' perspectives in respect of Higher Education

173. DfE has been made aware that on 7 July 2020, a report was presented to the House of Commons Petitions Committee, "*The Impact of Covid-19 on university students*". The report records the dissatisfaction of large numbers of students about the response of universities to the pandemic. DfE was not involved in the drafting and did not have prior access to this report.
174. DfE endeavoured to ensure that the Higher Education Institutions were communicating directly with their students. On 3 February 2020, DfE wrote to the Higher Education Institutions seeking updates on their contingency planning **Exhibits [HC-8/089 – INQ000614059, HC-8/056 – INQ000614001, HC-8/066 – INQ000614011, HC-8/090 – INQ000614063, HC-8/063 – INQ000614008]**. Further to this, the Permanent Secretary wrote to the Higher Education Institutions on 9 March 2020 asking for information in regards to measures the institutions will be taking and how these were to be communicated with student and staff cohorts **Exhibit [HC-8/060 – INQ000614005]**.
175. As referenced in paragraph 167, DfE developed a signposting document collating links to existing guidance from UK Government and PHA for publication on NI Direct, specifically in relation to students in FE and HE. The advice included within this document was not drafted by DfE, rather the links acted as a signpost to the advice. This was published on NI Direct and emailed to NUS-USI on 6 November 2020. **Exhibits [HC-8/062 – INQ000614007, HC-8/091 – INQ000614066, HC-8/070 – INQ000614040]**
176. During the Specified Period, DfE received correspondence from a significant number of students and their representatives, particularly in relation to the £500 disruption payment. As the Higher Education Institutions were responsible for delivering the payment, correspondents were advised to contact the relevant Higher Education Institution directly.
177. DfE Officials also engaged with the Higher Education Institutions on the back of receiving concerns from students and student unions about the impact of disruption to studies and value for money of online tuition. On 22 January 2021, the Minister for the Economy wrote to the Higher Education Institutions, reminding them of their duties under

consumer protection law, the need to maintain quality of teaching provision, maintain communication with students, taking an understanding approach with regard to student rental accommodation, to make commitments in relation to student mental health and wellbeing and to provide hardship payments to those most in need, including those who were most vulnerable including those who needed to self-isolate, international students, those less able to access remote learning and students with disabilities. **Exhibits [HC-8/078 – INQ000614048, HC-8/076 – INQ000614046, HC-8/077 – INQ000614047, HC-8/075 – INQ000614045, HC-8/092 – INQ000650479].**

Monitoring and assessment of impact in respect of Higher Education

178. DfE continued to assess the accountability, risk and sustainability of the Higher Education Institutions through its annual accountability process, as set out in **Exhibit [HC-8/093 – INQ000614072]**, which covers a number of areas including student recruitment and retention and compliance with Departmental accountability requirements.

179. In March 2021, DfE intervened with various financial support packages **Exhibits [HC-8/054 – INQ000613996, HC-8/094 – INQ000614073]**, this included the £500 grant to all students and also, in collaboration with the Higher Education Institutions, a range of initiatives to support students' physical and mental welfare; to ensure that all students had the necessary IT equipment to continue their studies online; to release students from onerous contracts for accommodation that they could not use; and to provide a safe environment for staff and students on campus.

180. In line with Managing Public Money NI (MPMNI) guidelines, post project evaluations (PPE) of these projects were undertaken **Exhibit [HC-8/095 – INQ000614074]**. DfE sought feedback from the Higher Education Institutions, who were delivery partners for the interventions applied. Feedback from the Higher Education Institutions was that these financial interventions mitigated the financial hardship for students and allowed continuation of courses. The funding enabled the provision of laptops to students who did not previously own one and this allowed them to remain engaged in their courses. The Higher Education Institutions advised that they felt the schemes were delivered successfully within tight timescales and didn't raise any specific lessons to be learned.

Differential Impacts in respect of Higher Education

181. Higher Education Providers (HEPs), which include the Higher Education Institutions and any other provider of Higher Education, including the Further Education colleges

providing HE in FE, have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for those with a disability under the terms of The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 ("SENDO 2005"), as amended.

182. The duty to make reasonable adjustments is anticipatory, which means Higher Education Providers must plan ahead and take a strategic approach to addressing the barriers that potentially impede individuals with different kinds of disability. This will involve Higher Education Providers putting in place systems that are inclusive or can be utilised as appropriate by disabled students, staff and/or visitors.

183. The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is intended to cover costs that a student's institution is not legally required to cover under SENDO. Under the terms of grant funding agreements with DfE, Higher Education Providers provide reports each year outlining the number of students who have been provided with a Needs Assessment, 1:1 Non-medical Help, or quotes for the supply of equipment/ assistive technology through DSA. The reports also contain feedback from the Higher Education Providers, Needs Assessors, Non-medical Help Support Providers, and Students on the DSA process.

184. DfE worked to ensure that during the Specified Period, students continued to have access to support through the DSA. A number of flexible arrangements were introduced in conjunction with social distancing protocols during the pandemic, including the remote provision of assessments of course related needs and one to one non-medical help **Exhibit [HC-8/059 – INQ000614004]**. Following receipt of positive feedback from the universities, colleges, support providers and students, these have been retained. Further analysis has not been undertaken to date.

185. In addition to this, following continued liaison with stakeholders in the Higher Education sector, DfE learnt that many students were dealing with serious financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic. In June 2020, DfE provided additional student support funds to the Higher Education Institutions to address the financial hardship which students were experiencing due to the pandemic. The groups of students identified as being a priority for this funding were mature students; lone parents and those students who were not eligible for the Childcare Grant; disabled students who were not in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA); care leavers; students who were homeless or who were living in Foyers (these provide accommodation, guidance and support for homeless young people); and final year students who were experiencing financial difficulty. Letters were sent to the Higher Education Institutions informing them of this funding on 22 June 2020. **Exhibits**

[HC-8/050 – INQ000613992, HC-8/096 – INQ000614075, HC-8/097 – INQ000614076, HC-8/098 – INQ000614077, HC-8/099 – INQ000614078, HC-8/100 – INQ000614079].

186. In March 2021, DfE provided further financial support packages including additional hardship funding to the Higher Education Institutions. DfE updated the student hardship guidance and conditions of funding for Higher Education student support funds to allow the Universities adequate scope to maximise the use of the hardship funding, and greater flexibility in assessing applications. There was a particular focus on delivering these funds for vulnerable groups including those from low-income households, international students who were ineligible for student support funding and care leavers. **Exhibit [HC-8/101 – INQ000614080]**

Attainment in respect of Higher Education

187. In the Business Case for the financial support packages provided to the Universities in March 2021, it stated that Student Hardship and Digital Poverty, if not addressed, could impact on the ability of students to continue their studies and contribute to high dropout rates **Exhibit [HC-8/094 – INQ000614073].**

188. In discussing how best to address the educational scarring effects of the pandemic on new entrants to Higher Education, the Higher Education Institutions collectively developed the Tertiary Transition Experience bid, as a one-year remedial intervention covering Academic Year 2021/22 **Exhibit [HC-8/102 – INQ000614081].** This intervention was deemed by Higher Education Institutions and DfE officials to be necessary to support a new intake of students into the Higher Education Sector in Northern Ireland who during the preceding 18 months would have had a significantly interrupted learning experience, both at an individual and general level.

189. DfE officials and Higher Education Institutions recognised that this cohort would have experienced long gaps in periods of structured learning, impacting on their confidence, study skills and good habits, which are enablers of academic success. In turn, this would result in those students being less prepared for their new programmes, and this would have an impact on their progression and attainment levels, leading to higher-than-normal failure and dropout rates.

190. The Tertiary Transition Experience consisted of three strands of support:

- a) Pre-entry support initiatives;

- b) Early entry to programme support activities commencing at the start of the academic year; and
- c) Longitudinal interventions across the entire academic year.

191. This mix of interventions was assessed through the DfE's business case process and determined to be the most appropriate solution to meet the needs of a range of learners preparing for entry in 2021/22, and would aim to address any negative impacts of the pandemic on attainment and progression levels.

Employment and future prospects in respect of Higher Education

192. DfE has not carried out any specific work on the impacts of the pandemic on the long-term employability and future prospects of higher education students.

193. However, throughout the specified period and since, DfE continually analyses and monitors the impact of Covid-19 on the labour market and economic activity levels and tailors policies accordingly. In February 2024, DfE published "*Delivering the Economic Vision*", which aims to improve the employment rate across Northern Ireland **Exhibit [HC-8/103 – INQ000614082]**. Initiatives DfE has carried out since the publication of this Economic Vision include a Skills Fund, which has helped 300 people who would traditionally experience barriers to learning, such as those who are neurodivergent, have a physical disability, or are from disadvantaged backgrounds, to receive support to ensure they can successfully transition from further and higher education into employment.

194. The DfE-commissioned report "*Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland - Report 1 - Literature, Context and Quantitative Analysis on Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland; And A Review of the Welfare System in relation to Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland - Understanding the Northern Ireland Post-COVID-19 labour market and economic inactivity: identifying causes, consequences, and paths forward*" **Exhibit [HC-8/104 – INQ000614083]**, published in October 2023, found relatively little evidence of "*The Great Resignation*" in Northern Ireland, particularly among the under 50s, and concluded that, "...despite a sharp increase in inactivity in NI at the onset of the pandemic, headline inactivity rates have fell [sic] back to pre-pandemic levels."

195. DfE also monitors Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) monthly Labour Market Reports. The January 2025 Labour Market Report **Exhibit [HC-8/105 – INQ000614084]** shows that, although it rose in net terms from 2.6% (December 2019 to

February 2020) to 4.4% (June to August 2021), Northern Ireland's unemployment rate (aged 16 and over) has since fallen to 1.7% (September to November 2024) (below pre-pandemic levels). In addition, the September to November 2024 estimate for total in employment (900,000) is higher than that for December 2019 to February 2020 (884,000).

196. Although not specifically in relation to Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Statistics Agency has been producing UK-wide Graduate Outcomes-based reports annually, which includes consideration of the impact of the pandemic. The conclusions of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Graduate Outcomes 2020/21 **Exhibit [HC-8/106 – INQ000614085]** include:

- *“Compared to the early years of the pandemic, we see a smaller proportion of graduates who are unemployed, and a smaller proportion enrolled in full-time further study. We also see a higher proportion in full-time work, with this figure up two percentage points from the pre-pandemic baseline. While some economic effects of the pandemic linger in society as a whole, it seems that opportunities for graduate employment have recovered strongly.”*
- *“By the time surveying began for 2020/21, COVID-19 remained at the forefront of public consciousness, but other events were gaining prominence, and, as restrictions continued to ease, it became increasingly clear that the pandemic was not the only event on the world stage; to name one prominent example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a series of economic events which are still unfolding. As other events continue to develop, it will in future years become increasingly difficult to determine which changes in the Graduate Outcomes data can be attributed to COVID-19, and which are connected to other factors.”*

Mental Health and Wellbeing in respect of Higher Education

197. On 4 February 2021 the Economy Minister announced funding for mental health support as part of the overall funding package committed to address the impact of the pandemic **Exhibit [HC-8/107 – INQ000614086]**, which was used to fund student unions to help them increase the mental health and wellbeing support they provide to students. In addition, DfE specifically referred to the need for the mental health of students to be considered in a letter to Higher Education Institutions on 22 January 2021 **Exhibits [HC-8/078 – INQ000614048, HC-8/076 – INQ000614046, HC-8/077 – INQ000614047, HC-8/075 – INQ000614045, HC-8/092 – INQ000650479]**. DfE continues to monitor mental health provision at the Higher Education Institutions, and works collaboratively with DoH

and other stakeholders (including the health trusts, the Higher Education Institutions and NUS-USI) to oversee an ongoing pilot scheme called “*Belfast Trust Student Mental Health Pilot*”, to assist students with mental health issues, which became particularly important in light of the pandemic.

Enrolment numbers in respect of Higher Education

198. There has been no work undertaken, either during the Specified Period or since, to analyse the extent to which the pandemic, or the measures taken to address it, impacted on the rates of young people enrolling to attend higher education. However, available data shows that enrolments of NI students at UK Higher Education Institutions increased by 5% between 2019/20 and 2020/21. Total numbers enrolled increased from 62,690 to 65,545, the largest annual increase for a decade which was mainly due to an increase in students at NI Higher Education Institutions. Some of this sharp increase relates to the change in how A-Level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. In 2021/22, enrolments increased by a further 1% to 66,100. Three quarters of NI Students were enrolled at NI Higher Education Institutions. Total enrolments fell in 2022/23 to 64,045 (latest data available) with the number of new entrants reflecting a return to pre pandemic levels **Exhibits [HC-8/108 – INQ000614087, HC-8/109 – INQ000614088, HC-8/110 – INQ000614089, HC-8/111 – INQ000614090]**.

Lessons Learned in respect of High Education

199. Analysis, noted above, has shown that the interventions put in place by DfE mitigated against the impact of Covid-19 on the financial pressures faced by students, their mental health, retention at university and academic attainment.

200. In line with Managing Public Money NI (MPMNI) guidelines, DfE undertakes post project evaluations (PPE) of its projects. Covid-19 Interventions applied by DfE included:

- a) funding for safe learning environments (PPE process is ongoing);
- b) funding to allow the cancellation of accommodation contracts for students **Exhibit [HC-8/112 – INQ000614091]**;
- c) additional hardship funding, funding to ensure all students had access to remote learning and funding towards mental health and wellbeing initiatives **Exhibit [HC-8/095 – INQ000614074]**; and

- d) a £500 award to all students to help alleviate financial hardship **Exhibit [HC-8/113 – INQ000616708]**.

201. As part of the PPE process, DfE sought feedback from the Universities, who were its delivery partners for the interventions applied. Feedback from the universities was that in terms of mitigating financial hardship for students, the funding facilitated students leaving their accommodation contracts without availing of continued accommodation costs so preventing further student hardship. This funding also assisted the university in providing a support network to students who remained in accommodation. This involved providing food, well-being support and a range of safe activities to ensure that residents who were unable to return home, remained engaged and not isolated. The provision of laptops to students who did not previously own one allowed them to remain engaged in their courses. The issue of £500 to all students helped to mitigate the impact of rising costs and the fact that many were unable to work due to closures of businesses.

202. Internally, lessons learned **Exhibit [HC-8/095 – INQ000614074]** concluded that the unprecedented circumstances and associated pressures within which DfE was operating resulted in a lack of clear and methodical record keeping and monitoring of the various programmes, and suggested that future projects would benefit from:

- a) prior consultation and ongoing liaison with any other branches with policy responsibility for the areas being addressed;
- b) better records management – it is important that there is a full audit trail of key decisions made during a project;
- c) effective and timely monitoring processes;
- d) clear and standardised reporting mechanisms/systems linked to well-defined objectives controlled for risk and set within easily read templates capturing all pertinent data; and
- e) timely review in line with standard practice.

Section 3 – Apprenticeships, Careers, Training and Skills

DfE's Roles and Responsibilities in relation to young people accessing apprenticeships, the Careers service or training in Northern Ireland

203. DfE is responsible for apprenticeships, the Careers Service and training provision. The Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education Division (ACVED) has two main areas of responsibility within DfE – vocational education and training programmes and the

provision of careers advice and guidance through the Careers Service. Vocational work-based and education learning programmes include Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Training for Success and Skills for Life Work provision. Both the Careers Service and Vocational Education and Skills provision play a crucial role in supporting and helping to build the supply of skills for our economy and drives growth and inclusion.

204. The key activities of DfE in relation to Apprenticeships, Careers and Training include:
- a) Delivery of Apprenticeship programmes supporting youth employment and improving the Northern Ireland skills base, by expanding provision, widening access and improving the economic relevance through working with employers to develop and refresh pathways, qualifications and curriculum.
 - b) Delivery and introduction of reformed vocational education programmes, youth training and youth inclusion programmes providing access to vocational education training and employability skills aimed at reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training.
 - c) Providing additional time on programmes and additional funding to Training Providers to help support participants with a disability. DfE also contracts separately for specialist Disability Support Services (DSS) providers, who work directly with Training Providers to support those with additional needs. DSS contractors provide advice and support to participants who have a disability both prior to entering and whilst participating on programmes to ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for these participants during their training to help them achieve the best possible outcomes.
 - d) Championing economic, social and personal development by facilitating the provision of relevant, high quality careers guidance.
 - e) Under the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, DfE has a public function to provide careers guidance in an impartial manner and in the best interests of the person receiving it. The DfE's Careers Service offers impartial and personalised advice and guidance on an all-age basis, provided by professionally qualified Careers Advisers. The aim is to ensure that all individuals, regardless of age or skills, have access to independent, high-quality advice which helps them to maximise their potential and contribute to their community and the local economy.
205. DfE also has responsibility for the skills agenda in Northern Ireland and a number of pre- and post-employment skills programmes including *Assured Skills*, *Skill Up* and *Innovate Us*.

206. DfE sets Operational Requirements for Apprenticeship and Training Providers in Northern Ireland. This includes the *ApprenticeshipsNI*, and *Higher-Level Apprenticeship* (HLA) and *Skills for Life and Work* programmes and DfE sets out a range of obligations on Training Providers/Contractors in relation to apprentices on each programme.

- a) In all aspects of delivery, Contractors are required to demonstrate a high standard, and to meet the specific requirements of the contract, in the areas of care and welfare; and safeguarding. They must ensure that there are adequate measures for safeguarding and wellbeing in place, in line with requirements, and that all staff have undergone appropriate and current training;
- b) The Contractor must, in all aspects of delivery, demonstrate a high standard in the areas of outcomes for learners; quality of provision; and leadership and management;
- c) The Operational Requirements state that teaching and training are of the highest quality, are relevant, tailored and well-resourced, and lead to measurable progression in learning. Also, that the curriculum offers coherent, broadly balanced programmes of learning which provide learners with clear progression opportunities to Further Education, Higher Education or career progression;
- d) DfE has a Higher-Level Apprenticeship programme that delivers vocational training for apprentices at levels 4 to 7. Skills for Life and Work is focused primarily on Entry Level/Level1 (ELL1), for young people in need of training at these levels. The programme acts as an important stepping stone to DfE's provision at Level 2 and above – namely the Traineeship, mainstream Further Education or an apprenticeship – or to other employment.
- e) DfE funds the off the job training element of an apprenticeship. There are no tuition fees payable.
- f) Apprentices are employees and attend the off the job training element once a week at an Further Education college, Private Training Organisation or Higher Education Institution, depending on the level of the apprenticeship. Any accommodation requirements would be agreed between the employer and the training provider. This would not be funded by DfE. Likewise, accommodation is not payable for youth training programmes such as Skills for Life and Work.

Role of DfE in relation to decisions pertaining to young people accessing apprenticeships or training during the specified period

207. The Covid-19 Pandemic was primarily a health crisis; but it was also an unparalleled economic event with initial indications that lockdown had a significant impact on the Northern Ireland economy with the number of people claiming unemployment benefits quickly surpassing the level experienced during the last economic downturn.

208. DfE also recognised that additional challenges would start to be realised as wider government support, such as the UK Government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), ended. Mitigating the worst of these risks depended upon opening up the economy safely, but the re-building and renewal of our economy would also be contingent upon skills and in particular apprenticeships. Employers would need access to the skills they needed to compete globally and young people, in particular, would need continued access to high quality routes into careers.

209. DfE engaged widely to better understand the impacts of the pandemic and in the development and delivery of DfE's response to the pandemic. This included meetings with key stakeholders and a formal consultation document **Exhibit [HC-8/114 – INQ000614092]** that was shared broadly for comment. The individuals and organisations engaged were:

- a) National Union of Students;
- b) Further Education Colleges including Principal's Group;
- c) Private Training Organisations involved in the delivery of ACVED programmes;
- d) Strategic Advisory Forum for Apprenticeships & Youth Training;
- e) Apprenticeship Sector Partnerships - Bodies responsible for developing curriculum and supporting apprenticeships in their sector;
- f) MEGA - Representative body for the Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Sector in Mid Ulster;
- g) Apprenticeships 4 Nation Group;
- h) NI Councils;
- i) Manufacturing NI;
- j) City Deal Stakeholders; and
- k) Department for Communities (DfC)

210. DfE's response was designed to mitigate the potential negative impacts that the pandemic, and measures taken to protect the public, had on the following areas:

- a) The viability of the vocational education sector;
- b) The number of opportunities available to young people, school leavers and apprentices; and
- c) The strength of the wider economy.

211. Significant risks to young people identified included access to:

- a) Careers Advice – although there was some online provision Careers Guidance Interviews were primarily delivered face-to-face. With this avenue not available there was a risk that young people would not have access to the advice needed to take informed decisions about their future;
- b) New opportunities / continued employment – with significant parts of the economy shut down, and a large number of apprentices furloughed, employers were indicating that their focus was shifting from shorter-term development to longer-term sustainability goals resulting in a risk that there would be a reduction in the number of new apprenticeship opportunities being created and furloughed apprentices would not be returned to the workforce;
- c) Training provision – Vocational Education in Northern Ireland is contracted with a payment structure based upon a mixture of attendance and achievement-based allowances. The pandemic had an immediate impact on contractors' ability to deliver training and with many contracted organisations being Small to Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs), reliant on this income stream, there was a risk to financial viability with any closures negatively impacting the opportunities available for young people; and
- d) Online Learning and Assessment – The vast majority of vocational education training and assessment was delivered face-to-face. The unavailability of this medium presented a significant challenge both in terms of training providers and assessment organisations having to adapt systems and young people requiring appropriate technology to access training and assessment.

Significant decisions made by DfE in relation to young people accessing apprenticeships or training during the Specified Period

212. DfE responded quickly and decisively to the crisis by providing online guidance and learner support via the NiBusinessInfo.co.uk and NIDirect websites. Work was also immediately initiated to assess impacts, update procedures to recognise the change to distance learning, and to develop the new interventions required to mitigate potential negative impacts. This resulted in the following actions:

- a) Careers Service – moving delivery of this critical function online to ensure that young people, and all those in need, had continued access to professional careers guidance during the lockdown period.
- b) Supplier relief – providing financial and other support to secure the continued viability, and capacity to support learners, of our skills infrastructure.
- c) Apprenticeship and Youth Training Vocational Education Programme Delivery – transferring apprentices, under the age of 18, who lost their jobs to *Training for Success* (TfS) to facilitate continued learning.
- d) Access to technology – creation of a *Digital Hardship Fund* for non-statutory training providers to support participants with digital access needs through the purchase of relevant equipment, software and connectivity solutions.
- e) Vocational Qualifications (VQs) – Developing alternative assessment and award measures in conjunction with key stakeholders.
- f) Apprenticeship Recovery Initiative – introducing a suite of new measures to protect apprentices and apprenticeship opportunities through both lockdown and recovery phases of the Covid-19 pandemic.

213. During the Specified Period DfE also developed the skills strategy for Northern Ireland, “*Skills for a 10x Economy*” which was published on 24 March 2022 **Exhibit [HC-8/115] INQ000614094**. The strategy was informed by extensive research and stakeholder engagement, drawing upon key evidence sources such as the Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland, the Employer Skills Survey, and reports from the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland and Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC). It set out three overarching strategic goals aimed at addressing skills imbalances within the Northern Ireland economy while promoting social inclusion and overall wellbeing.

214. Although the strategy's development and research commenced prior to these events, the post-pandemic and post-Brexit context was considered during its finalisation and subsequent publication in March 2022.

215. During the Specified Period, the research and development of the strategy involved cross-departmental collaboration with the DfC and the DE, both of whom were represented on the Programme and Advisory Boards. It should be noted, however, that this engagement and collaboration was not specifically related to DfE's Covid-19 response.

Pre-pandemic planning in respect of Apprenticeships and Training for Young People

216. In line with Departmental requirements ACVED had a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) in place prior to the onset of the pandemic. This document sets out key contacts for all services, including youth training and apprenticeships programmes, along with the resource requirements and target response times required to re-instate priority functions following a major incident. Planning focussed on risks to the Division and risks to workstreams within DfE rather than risks to providers and how they deliver their services.

Monitoring and assessment of impact in respect of Apprenticeships and Training for Young People

Differential Impact

217. DfE contracts for specialist Disability Support Services (DSS) providers, who work directly with Training Providers to support those with additional needs. DSS contractors provide advice and support to participants who have a disability both prior to entering and whilst participating on programmes to ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for these participants during their training to help them achieve the best possible outcomes.

218. To ensure the continued viability, and the capacity to support learners, of the sector, DfE developed a package of supplier relief measures related to the retention of service delivery across non-statutory contractors, including these DSS contractors. Further details of this package of measures are set out below.

219. The package of support ensured the continued economic viability of DSS contractors during the pandemic. It enabled contractors to resume face-to-face training, disability support provision and protected the opportunities for future employment of participants with disabilities.

Attainment

220. In March 2020 the schools, colleges and training providers ceased face to face delivery. It was therefore not possible for learners to undertake planned vocational assessments/examinations in Summer 2020.

221. The vocational landscape is complex involving more than 2,500 qualifications, delivered by 89 awarding organisations in a range of educational settings. Vocational

Qualifications (VQs) serve a number of important purposes, such as progression to further study and signalling occupational competence. UK regulators work closely together to provide continuity and consistency for learners and protect the portability and integrity of qualifications throughout the UK.

222. From March 2020, when it was identified that the Covid-19 outbreak posed a significant threat to the award of qualifications in Northern Ireland, DfE worked very closely with UK level and local stakeholders to develop a robust alternative system for the award of vocational results in Summer 2020. The primary objective was to ensure that as many learners as possible received fair and timely results to enable progression pathways **Exhibit [HC-8/116 – INQ000616709]**.

223. DfE commissioned CCEA Regulation, an independent function within the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), who are responsible for the accreditation and regulation of regulated qualifications offered in Northern Ireland, to urgently identify appropriate measures to facilitate the award of grades in summer 2020. In April 2020, DfE established a Task & Finish Group to give our Further Education colleges, schools and training organisations a key platform to ensure that any alternative measures were practical, effective and achievable. The members of the group included officials from DfE, ETI, Further Education colleges, CCEA, CAFRE and Action Mental Health. This task and finish group operated until April 2021, as normal examination arrangements resumed in the 2021/22 academic year.

224. On 27 April 2020, the Economy Minister wrote to CCEA Regulation and confirmed the Northern Ireland policy position which aligned with the approach taken in England and Wales. **Exhibit [HC-8/117 - INQ000614095]**

225. Between April and September 2020, 86,701 certificates were awarded across 1,732 in-scope VQs by 67 awarding organisations. This figure represents 83% of the number of certifications made in the previous year and is a definitive measure of success in terms of outcome, particularly in the midst of a pandemic with all its challenges. **Exhibits [HC-8/118 – INQ000614096, HC-8/119 – INQ000614098]**

226. On 17 September 2020, the Minister wrote to CCEA (and copied to DE) to confirm the initial Northern Ireland policy approach for 2020/21 which aligned with the approach in England / Wales and was premised on a 'business as usual' model with supporting adaptations, taking into account lessons learnt from Summer 2020 awarding

arrangements. **Exhibits [HC-8/120 - INQ000616710, HC-8/121 – INQ000614099, HC-8/122 – INQ000614100]**

227. On 8 October 2020, DfE established a Communications Working Group consisting of Further Education colleges, CCEA Regulation, Schools, DE, Education Training Inspectorate, Training Organisations and the NI Federation of Awarding Bodies to identify operational solutions to mitigate ongoing disruption to teaching and learning **Exhibit [HC-8/123 – INQ000614101]**. The Group also ensured the co-ordination of key messaging with wider Northern Ireland stakeholders such as providers, parents and learners. Implementation progress on key policy decisions or other matters of significant interest were reported on a regular basis to the overarching Task & Finish Group. This working group operated until May 2022.

228. Following extensive lockdown restrictions across all UK jurisdictions, on 5 January 2021, the Minister, in conjunction with colleagues in England and Wales, agreed that further flexibilities would be put in place for the January exams series, particularly in relation to BTecs (practical, work-related qualifications that combine theory with practical learning). **Exhibit [HC-8/124 - INQ000614102, HC-8/125 – INQ000614103]**

229. On 22 January 2021, the Economy Minister announced the cancellation of Essential Skills and VQ external examinations for the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year and instructed CCEA Regulation to ensure that awarding organisations put in place suitable alternative awarding arrangements that were reflective of that year's particular circumstances **Exhibits [HC-8/126 – INQ000614104, HC-8/127 - INQ000614105, HC-8/128 – INQ000614106]**. Following the cancellation of external examinations, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL) launched a consultation of the Vocational Qualifications Regulatory Framework. An update was provided to the Minister for the Economy on 3 March 2021 along with a press release and letter to Dr. Caoimhe Archibald, the Chair of the Economy Committee **Exhibits [HC-8/129 - INQ000614107, HC-8/130 - INQ000614108, HC-8/131 – INQ000614109]**. On 24 March 2021, CCEA Regulation adopted and published the revised Vocational Qualifications Regulatory Framework.

230. 142,000 certificates were issued during 2020-2021 which equates to 80% of pre-pandemic levels (2018-2019). This is an increase of 4.2% more certifications compared to 2019-2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/132 – INQ000614110]**.

231. On 6 September 2021, the Minister set out the agreed policy position for Northern Ireland and wrote to CCEA and announced that assessment should resume for vocational and technical qualifications, with suitable adaptations put in place. **Exhibits [HC-8/133 - INQ000614111, HC-8/134 – INQ000614112, HC-8/135 – INQ000614113].**
232. DfE continued to lead the work through the Task & Finish Group referenced in paragraph 225 above and Northern Ireland Communications Working Group and worked closely with CCEA Regulation to develop suitable implementation and management arrangements.
233. Despite the emergence of the Omicron variant in December 2021 causing much uncertainty, the January 2022 series of exams proceeded, and lessons learned on the operational matters from this exam series were taken on board by the Learning Centres and Awarding Organisations for the summer exam series **Exhibit [HC-8/136 - INQ000614114].**
234. Summer 2022 saw the return of a full examination series in all four UK jurisdictions and 2022 was broadly treated as a transition year to reflect a pandemic recovery period and disruption to students' education. 149,118 qualification certificates awarded to students between September 2021 and August 2022, across 1,881 vocational qualifications **Exhibit [HC-8/137 – INQ000614115].**

Access to technology in respect of Apprenticeships and Training for Young People

235. On 20 March 2020, following Ministerial approval, face-to-face training was suspended due to the escalation of Covid-19. DfE asked training providers to maintain engagement and supportive contact with participants and to begin rebuilding learning activity via remote methods.
236. During April 2020, DfE gathered quantitative information from non-statutory training providers to ascertain the numbers of participants affected and the issues encountered by those identified as not having remote access to their programme. Information received from organisations indicated approximately 1,900 young people enrolled on Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI were not engaged in remote learning. **Exhibit [HC-8/138 - INQ000616711]**

237. To address this, on 30 April 2020, DfE submitted a bid to the Department of Finance as part of the June monitoring round exercise for £450k, which was granted. **Exhibits [HC-8/138 - INQ000616711, HC-8/139 – INQ000616712]**
238. On 6 August 2020, a Digital Hardship Fund was approved and made available to support disadvantaged participants undertaking Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI with non-statutory providers, for the purchase of IT equipment and/or services. **Exhibit [HC-8/140 - INQ000614116]**
239. An evaluation commenced in August 2021 to consider if the objective of the Digital Hardship Fund was met, by determining if the equipment was being used for its intended purpose and if it had enabled remote learning for those who were most at risk of not being able to fully avail of their training due to difficulties accessing remote learning; the evaluation reports are exhibited at **Exhibits [HC-8/141 – INQ000616713, HC-8/142 – INQ000616720]**.
240. Respondents to the evaluation highlighted that the equipment and connectivity was most beneficial in allowing all trainees to access remote learning. Learners were able to access the required on-line platforms, learning videos and other software required for their courses. In addition, some providers cited that trainees also benefited by being able to keep in contact with tutors much more easily and this assisted with online pastoral care and dealing with mental health issues.
241. The evaluation report responses from training organisations shows that the equipment and connectivity solutions funded through the Digital Hardship Fund were considered to be very effective in enabling trainees to access remote learning. Without this funding being made available there is an overwhelming body of opinion that a lot of young people, particularly those most economically disadvantaged, would have struggled to continue with their training and many would have left altogether. In a very small number of cases, it was identified that some devices were not being used as intended, this misuse of equipment was highlighted to senior management in the organisations who provided written assurance that remedial action was taken. The funding has also assisted in the provision of help and support to young people who were having difficulties with their mental health.

Employment and future prospects in respect of Apprenticeships and Training for Young People

Careers Service

242. DfE's Careers Service offers impartial and personalised advice and guidance on an all-age basis, provided by professionally qualified advisers. The aim is to support individuals to make informed decisions about the opportunities available in education, training and apprenticeships to help them fulfil their potential, leading to rewarding and sustained employment. For those young people in school, this process begins in Year 10 when pupils are making subject choices and continues through to Year 14.
243. On 20 March 2020, the Minister suspended all face-to-face careers services for young people and adults in order to ensure the safety of staff and clients **Exhibit [HC-8/143 – INQ000614117]**.
244. Processes were established to monitor DE guidance and wider public health restrictions to allow delivery of careers services to be adapted to best meet the needs of clients at the earliest opportunity.
245. Given the potential for negative impact and recognising the wider effects of Covid-19 on young people, the Careers Service worked intensively with all schools to agree contingency delivery methods best suited to the needs of pupils. School partnership working arrangements were revised to ensure maximum reach via online channels. Area Learning Community (ALC) representatives were consulted, and the working arrangements were agreed with DE and the EA. **Exhibit [HC-8/144 - INQ000614118]**.
246. Working with DE, EA and ALC Chairs, the Careers Service developed a Contingency Service Delivery Model (SDM) **Exhibit [HC-8/145 – INQ000614119]**, which moved from a primarily face-to-face delivery model to one delivered via digital channels only i.e. telephone, email and webchat. This SDM which established a framework for the delivery of careers services in order to meet the needs of schools and pupils and ensured the safety of all concerned, was implemented in schools from September 2020.
247. From October 2020, video conferencing was introduced as an additional method of delivery for all clients. In the absence of face-to-face services, schools were encouraged to support pupils in accessing DfE careers services through video call. This facilitated a 'live' two-way conversation between the pupil and their DfE Careers Adviser. This new

digital channel was well received and proved to be an efficient way to reach a greater number of young people.

248. The Careers Service worked closely and flexibly with individual schools to ensure the continued delivery of careers guidance services to young people and their parents. From March to June 2020, Careers Advisers maintained communications with post-primary schools to ensure that every effort was made to achieve the annual target of providing at least 95% of pupils in their final year of compulsory schooling with impartial and professional careers guidance. With all school pupils being educated at home and an exclusive reliance on remote digital service delivery, the Careers Service achieved 85% against this target. The Careers Service conducted an extensive follow up exercise with school leavers in September 2020. Working with careers teachers, DfE's careers advisers identified young people who had not secured a positive destination and provided support and guidance as required.

249. The Careers Service provided support to parents and young people receiving exam results with extended opening hours on both results days. From 13 August to 30 September 2020 over 890 career guidance interventions were conducted.

250. Careers advisers provided pre-entry guidance through remote delivery channels to all young people entering Training for Success (TfS) in September 2020. In addition, support was provided to young apprentices who were made redundant and permitted to join TfS. In total, from 23 March to 16 October 2020, the Careers Service facilitated 49,492 contacts with young people (under the age of 18).

251. Throughout the pandemic, the Careers Service maintained regular and direct communications with schools. This involved regular, and often daily, contact between Careers Advisers, Careers Teachers and School Principals. The Careers Service also had ad-hoc discussions with counterparts in England, Wales, and Scotland to share and inform best practice regarding the response to the pandemic.

252. Enhanced careers support, delivered by the Careers Service, was made available to all apprentices who became redundant as a result of the pandemic. The tailored support provided included:

- a) careers advice and guidance to help clients understand, balance and manage their skills and abilities with alternative career and job opportunities;
- b) job searching;

- c) help with CVs, application forms; and
- d) support with job interview preparation.

Apprenticeship Recovery Initiative

253. DfE's key aim for its Apprenticeship Recovery Initiative **Exhibit [HC-8/114 – INQ000614092]** was ensuring that apprenticeships and work-based learning prepared participants for the rapidly changing needs of the economy. DfE identified four broad objectives to structure the consideration of policy response to apprenticeship recovery:

- a) Minimise apprenticeship job losses;
- b) Maintain and grow supply of apprenticeship opportunities;
- c) Support Apprentices who have been displaced or lost their Apprenticeship; and
- d) Maintain and grow capacity in the skills system.

254. Having engaged broadly across the sector and assessed the latest data on impact of the pandemic on jobs and the economy and following a review of previous policy interventions in Northern Ireland, and having considered the wide range of interventions that were considered/delivered across the UK and international exemplars, DfE developed the:

- a) Return, Retain, Result Scheme;
- b) Recruit Scheme; and
- c) Challenge Fund.

255. The Return, Retain, Result Scheme was a response developed by DfE to address challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the emerging negative impact on the economy and young people. The intervention supported the return, retention and completion of apprentices on apprenticeship programmes in Northern Ireland by incentivising employers in all sectors of the economy, to return furloughed apprentices on the UK's Coronavirus Job-Retention Scheme (CJRS) to work and return to apprenticeship completion.

256. The Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative was designed to award businesses up to £3,700 to encourage the return to work and retention to successful apprenticeship completion of up to 4,500 furloughed apprentices in both the AppsNI and Higher-Level Apprenticeship programmes. The scheme was agreed by the Minister on the 3 September 2020 **Exhibits [HC-8/146 – INQ000614120, HC-8/147 – INQ000616714]**

257. The intervention began from 1 November 2020, as the CJRS was originally scheduled to come to an end on 31 October 2020. The original scheme was to primarily run for 5 months to 31 March 2021 (with future liability anticipated in relation to future successful apprenticeship completion). The original cost of the scheme was expected to be £14.3m consisting of £11.5m being incurred up to end of financial year 2020-21 and £2.8m of tails in 2021-22.

258. In total up to £3,700 per apprentice was payable to employers consisting of 3 incentive payments as follows per the original schedule of CJRS closure on 31 October 2020:

- a) Return - £500 per returned furloughed apprentice payable for the first full month of paid employment from 1 November 2020;
- b) Retain - maximum £2,000: being £500 per month for up to 4 months per retained apprentice after the “return” month; and
- c) Result - £1,200 for successful full framework achievement of a returned furloughed apprentice.

259. Due to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 which resulted in the extension of local lockdowns together with several extensions to the CJRS, which ended on 30 September 2021, the DfE Grade 5 agreed to the scheme eligibility being extended in tandem to provide provision for the same cohort of furloughed apprentices within the same approximate budget requirements, only phased over a longer period in 2021-22 **Exhibits [HC-8/148 - INQ000650480, HC-8/149 – INQ000614121, HC-8/150 – INQ000616715].**

260. The Recruit Scheme intervention was developed with the aim of encouraging and supporting employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been displaced by other employers by providing a financial incentive for each new apprentice employed **Exhibits [HC-8/146 – INQ000614120, HC-8/151 – INQ000614122].**

261. The scheme supported the delivery of DfE’s flagship AppsNI & Higher-Level Apprenticeship programmes. Covid-19 resulted in a reduction in opportunities within the job market and with approximately 25,000 school leavers each year the impact would have been felt most by young people who research has shown are impacted most severely during times of recession.

262. In order to stimulate demand and the creation of apprenticeship opportunities this intervention was originally available for opportunities created between 1 April 2020 and 31

March 21 and applied to all new apprenticeship opportunities created in this period, with the payment applying equally to employers of all sizes and in all sectors right across Northern Ireland and apprenticeships created for 'new' apprentices, or 'displaced' apprentices.

263. It was a short-term intervention targeted to prevent longer term economic impacts, such as the expansion of the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) pool, leading to greater numbers of long term unemployed. By encouraging job creation, this intervention ensured that employers continued to have access to people with the skills and qualifications needed to maintain productivity and grow their businesses.
264. The original cost of the scheme was expected to be £12.5m consisting of £8.3m being incurred up to end of financial year 2020-21 and £4.2m of tails in 2021-22.
265. This intervention supported employers with up to £3,000 incentive for each new apprenticeship opportunity created consisting of 2 components as follows:
- a) £2,000 after 90 days retention; and
 - b) £1,000 after 200 days retention.
266. Due to the continued impacts of Covid-19 which resulted in the extension of local lockdowns together with several extensions to the CJRS, which ended on 30 September 2021, scheme eligibility was extended in tandem to provide provision for an additional cohort of new apprentices from 1 April 2021 to 31 March.
267. The Challenge Fund intervention aimed to maintain and/or grow the supply of apprenticeship opportunities. It was established to aid the development of new and innovative solutions to mitigate risk, promote collaboration and increase employer confidence to engage with the apprenticeship system to achieve the overall aim of maintaining the skills pipeline and preventing short term economic shock resulting in long term damage to businesses/sectors. It was approved by the DfE Grade 5 on 26 August 2020 **Exhibits [HC-8/152 – INQ000616716 & HC-8/153 – INQ000614124]**.
268. The challenge fund aim was to promote collaboration and encourage new models of recruitment and apprenticeship delivery including, but not limited to the following:
- a) Shared Apprenticeship Models;
 - b) Apprenticeship brokerage Service;

- c) Employer Apprenticeship Mentoring Programmes to give managers the skills they need to effectively manage apprentices/apprenticeship programmes gaining maximum benefit for the employer;
- d) Apprentice mentoring programme to help new apprentices integrate into businesses; and
- e) The removal of monetary and non-monetary barriers to recruitment.

269. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000. Original Business Case approval was for £0.5m for 2020-21 from Executive Covid funding, while Business Case re-approval was for £0.625m split over 2 periods 2020-21 & 2021-22
Exhibit [HC-8/154 – INQ000616718]

Supplier relief scheme

270. To ensure the continued viability, and the capacity to support learners, of the sector, DfE implemented a supplier relief scheme aimed at providers of Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland to ensure that provision continued to be available once restrictions were eased and lifted **Exhibit [HC-8/155 – INQ000614125]**. The scheme was approved by the Economy Minister on 6 May 2020.

271. Business planning was reactive in line with Covid-19 supplier relief guidance issued by DoF. DoF Guidance issued on 30 March 2020 (PGN 01/20: Supplier Relief due to COVID-19), **Exhibit [HC-8/156 – INQ000614126]** whereby Departments were instructed to take action to continue to pay suppliers at risk due to Covid-19 on a continuity and retention basis so they would be able to resume normal service delivery and fulfil their contractual obligations when the outbreak was over. A Project Team was quickly established in April 2020 within DfE to develop and administer the supplier relief schemes. Whilst the Project Team met regularly to discuss progress and agree the appropriate course of action for any issues arising, these meetings were not minuted. The Project Team was disbanded in July 2022 following the completion of all post payment verification checks.

272. In line with this guidance, DfE developed a package of supplier relief measures related to the retention of service delivery across non-statutory ApprenticeshipsNI (AppsNI), Training for Success (TfS) and Disability Support Service (DSS) contractors. The TfS scheme also included the continuation of weekly Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments to programme participants.

273. Initially ministerial approval was secured to operate the schemes until the end of June 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/157 – INQ000614127]** but in line with further DoF guidance issued on 22 June 2020 (PGN 02/20: Recovery and Transition from COVID-19) **Exhibit [HC-8/158 – INQ000267877]**, ministerial approval was received to extend the schemes until 31 October 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/159 – INQ000614130]**.
274. The package of support ensured the continued economic viability of training and DSS contractors during the pandemic. It enabled contractors to resume face-to-face training, disability support provision and the fulfilment of contractual obligations quickly and effectively under the new Covid-19 operating environment.
275. In particular, the support provided viability to DSS contractors, who provide advice and support to participants who have a disability both prior to entering and whilst participating on programmes to ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for these participants during their training to help them achieve the best possible outcomes. This measure protected the opportunities for future employment of participants with disabilities.
276. Under the schemes, ACVED made supplier relief payments totalling just under £8million to non-statutory AppsNI, TfS and DSS contractors, together with EMA payments of just under £2.5 million to TfS participants.
277. Engagement with external stakeholders (non-statutory contractors) was primarily through the issue of ad hoc advice and operational support and through the issue of formal guidance via Departmental memos. **Exhibits [HC-8/160 – INQ000614131, HC-8/161 – INQ000614132, HC-8/162 – INQ000614133, HC-8/163 – INQ000614134, HC-8/164 – INQ000614135, HC-8/165 – INQ000614136, HC-8/166 – INQ000614137, HC-8/167 – INQ000614138, HC-8/168 – INQ000614139, HC-8/169 – INQ000614140, HC-8/170 – INQ000614141, HC-8/171 – INQ000614142, HC-8/172 – INQ000614143, HC-8/173 – INQ000614144, HC-8/174 – INQ000614145, HC-8/175 – INQ000614146]**.
278. In order to inform DfE's development of information and guidance for Training for Success (TfS) contractors on their learner support approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic, DfE staff conducted interviews with all contractors operating TfS during late April and early May 2020 **Exhibit [HC-8/176 – INQ000614147]**.

Peace4Youth Programme

279. Peace4Youth was a multi-outcome, cross-border programme which delivered towards DfE's United Youth commitment under the NI Executive's 'Together: Building a United Community' strategy. The programme ran from 2017 until mid-2022 and focussed on supporting young people in the target group to develop capabilities in areas of personal development, good relations and citizenship, ultimately enhancing their employability and improving their life chances. The target group was young people aged 14-24 who were disadvantaged, marginalised, at risk of involvement in violence or paramilitary activity and were typically not in education, employment or training. Peace4Youth was delivered through 11 projects, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). DfE was the Accountable Department in Northern Ireland, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth was the Accountable Department in the Republic of Ireland.

280. When Covid-19 restrictions were introduced in March 2020, delivery of the Peace4Youth Programme moved on-line. DfE engaged with the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) and the Irish Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) from March 2020 to October 2021 on a reduction to output indicator requirements due to the move to online delivery. Decisions and information provision in relation to delivery were undertaken by SEUPB. DfE continued to provide incentive payments to all eligible young people from Northern Ireland for time spent engaging on the programme remotely.

Skills initiatives

281. DfE published its skills strategy document on 24 March 2022 **Exhibit [HC-8/115 – INQ000614094]**. The strategy recognised that school leavers and young people were among the hardest hit by the decline in economic activity following the pandemic as well as noting the potential to take advantage of new ways of working which emerged during the pandemic, for example, the capacity to engage in education and skills development through remote digital channels.

282. The strategy highlighted the need for targeted skills investment to support individuals to develop their skills and qualifications, including young people impacted by the pandemic. It discussed initiatives such as JobStart, launched in April 2021 in collaboration with the Department for Communities, to enhance employability for 16–24-year-olds. Recognising barriers faced by young people, it also proposed revised entry-level and Level

1 programmes, incorporating remote learning to improve access to essential skills and qualifications. Additionally, it supported the continuation of the Skill Up Programme which was introduced to provide flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities, ensuring individuals could adapt to changing labour market demands.

283. Skills Focus is a post-employment training programme, in place since 2015 and ongoing, that is open to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) with fewer than 250 employees. The Programme is delivered by the six Further Education (FE) Colleges and provides tailored skills provision, up-skilling and re-skilling for individual companies with regulated qualifications at level 2 and above. This includes accredited and industry standard qualifications.

284. The six FE colleges put mechanisms into place during the Specified Period to allow them to continue to deliver the Skills Focus and InnovateUs programmes where possible, delivering virtually to learners.

285. As part of the Covid-19 response there was a clear need to support businesses with additional support for continuing skills development. To assist employers with this, DfE waived the 25% employer contribution required for the Skills Focus programme **Exhibit [HC-8/177 – INQ000614148]**. This was approved by the Minister on 6 May 2020.

286. The InnovateUs programme, in place since 2012 and ongoing, enables small businesses with fewer than 50 employees to acquire skills to engage in innovation activities, helping them develop new or modified products, processes or services in a wide range of sectors. As InnovateUs is fully funded, it helped small businesses at a time when income may have been reduced and helped the businesses diversify, digitise and explore opportunities for growth. The impact of Covid-19 increased demand for the programme.

287. Both programmes received additional budget in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial year through the Covid Recovery fund and from the Economic Recovery Action Plan to help meet the increased demand. In response to Covid-19 DfE widened the eligibility of InnovateUs and Skills Focus to include Social Enterprises **Exhibit [HC-8/178 – INQ000614149]**. This was approved by the Minister on 15 September 2020. Both programmes are likely to have included participants within the 18 – 24-year-old age group who were in employment or furloughed during this period.

288. DfE also offers Assured Skills Academies, which provide pre-employment training aimed at those who are unemployed, under-employed or in search of a new career. At the start of the pandemic, these academies moved to online learning where possible. For some planned academies this was not an option, leading to postponements and cancellations. For example, one company said online training delivery would not meet their needs and they would postpone the academy, further engagement resulted in full cancellation and another company postponed their planned academy to 21/22. There were some delays with welding academies waiting for Covid-19 measures to be put in place, as these require practical training in the workshops.

289. In the 20/21 Financial Year there were 27 academies delivered by Further Education colleges, BMC, NWRC and SWC, 24 fully online and three classroom learning and in the 21/22 FY there was fully online, hybrid and classroom options resulting in 48 academies delivered across all six regional colleges. In that year ERAP funding was utilised for skills needs within the manufacturing sector and 14 welding academies were delivered in a classroom environment due to the practical nature of the training.

290. It should be noted however that Assured Skills Academies are open to everyone over 18 years of age who meet the eligibility criteria of the opportunity, so delivery is likely to have included participants within the 18–24 year old age group (we do not hold breakdown data on age groups).

Lessons Learned in respect of Apprenticeships and Training for Young People

291. DfE commissioned CCEA Regulation to conduct an evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs in Northern Ireland following the close of summer 2020 examinations **Exhibits [HC-8/179 – INQ000614150, HC-8/180 – INQ000614151]**.

292. Two further evaluations were conducted for the academic years 2020-2021 **Exhibit [HC-8/132 – INQ000614110]** and 2021-2022 **Exhibits [HC-8/181 – INQ000614152, HC-8/137 – INQ000614115]**. The evaluation in each year was conducted in two phases to ensure an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data.

293. The key focus of each evaluation was to capture stakeholder experiences, identify successes and challenges, and identify lessons learned that would inform subsequent arrangements throughout the Covid-19 period.

294. The 2021-2022 evaluation is longitudinal in focus, covering the whole Covid-19 period 2020-2022. It examined and compared trends and patterns over time and retrospectively determined if lessons learned were appropriately and effectively applied.

295. The findings from the longitudinal evaluation are as follows:

- a) Data from the Covid-19 impacted period showed a high percentage of certification, demonstrating the success of alternative assessment and awarding arrangements.
- b) Timing and clarity of communications posed challenges for stakeholders in the early stages of the pandemic. However, the establishment of a range of communication channels across various stakeholder groups resulted in a significant improvement.
- c) The transition to online learning, and the associated requirement to upskill lecturers and teachers for online delivery, along with the development of new processes around the submission of learner evidence for assessment posed challenges in the early stages of the pandemic.
- d) Positive steps were taken to implement lessons learned across all stakeholder groups. The development of new practices and processes resulted in the stabilisation of assessment, minimising disruption for learners.
- e) The recommendations have been considered and incorporated into current business as usual processes.

296. In May 2021, the Careers Service conducted a survey of pupils, parents, teachers, and staff to canvass their views and experiences of digital careers services and to inform the development of service delivery plans going forward **Exhibit [HC-8/182 – INQ000614154]**.

From the analysis of responses, three key themes emerged:

- a) increased confidence and satisfaction in the use of digital channels to support and enable the delivery of Careers services.
- b) young people at all key transition stages require personalised careers guidance services through digital and non-digital access channels; and
- c) demand for increased parental involvement in their child's careers decision making.

297. Taking account of the feedback received from key users on the delivery of digital services during the pandemic period and also recognising the many benefits that technology can bring to users and delivery partners, including young people, Schools and

Careers Teachers, the Careers Service moved to implement a new service delivery model which now comprises a blend of both digital and face-to-face services.

Statement of Truth

298. I declare that the contents of this statement are true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief. I 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 to truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Personal Data

Signed:

Dated: 28 July 2025