Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. I wish you well with your conference.

The pandemic has brought into sharp relief the ways in which history repeats itself.

In 1921 the world was recovering after a deadly influenza outbreak had killed millions and left the global economy devastated – today, after several waves of COVID 19, a programme of mass vaccination means that an end to the current crisis may potentially, finally be in sight.

Also in 1921, a controversial land border was drawn on this island – today, we have disagreement about how and whether that anniversary should be marked. Territorial boundaries have been made even more complicated by the creation of a disputed sea border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

In 1921 Catholic-Irish and Protestant-British communities were divided and mutually antagonistic – that same separation is still evident and endemic in Northern Ireland today.

In 1921 the contested question of sovereignty on this island was headline news – today, Brexit and demographic changes have brought renewed calls for a border poll.

Similarly, the search for a reformed vision for the future of education seems to come into focus every 100 years or so…

In 1831 the Stanley Letter heralded the arrival of the National school system.

In 1923 the Marquess of Londonderry’s Education Act mapped out a visionary reboot of the system of schooling for the recently created Northern Ireland.

A century further on there is, once again, an opportunity to re-shape education here. An independent review of education is scheduled to commence later this year.

This may be a once in a lifetime opportunity – a Bevedrige moment - to devise a system that genuinely meets the needs of a dynamic and diverse society in the twenty first century.

Both Stanley and Londonderry had envisioned a system where Catholic and Protestant pupils would be educated together – where religious instruction would take place outside of school hours – and where schools would be managed on a cross-community basis.

Both were doomed to fail.

The structure of education in NI today is the product of a hundred years of political horse-trading and the protection of vested interests.

The result is a system of mind-boggling complexity – with levels, depths and nuances so convoluted that even those who work within it may not be fully aware of their existence or implications.

Those courageous individuals who will be undertaking the review of education may well know where they are trying to get to but as the old adage goes – when asking for directions – “if that’s where you’re aiming for, I’m not sure that I’d be wanting to start from here!”

That is not to say that much of the education provision in Northern Ireland’s schools isn’t exemplary – it is. And teachers here are rightly held in very high esteem by the community.

Schools may be divided but they are far from being ‘bastions of bigotry’. Through many years of EMU programmes, CRED programmes and more recently Shared Education initiatives – education administrators, schools and teachers have sought to go beyond simply delivering the syllabus. They have made a unique contribution to the protection of the children that they serve, to supporting efforts to build bridges between communities, and to promoting the development of a shared society.

Unfortunately, even during lockdown, there was limited evidence of cross-sectoral co-operation between schools to share the responsibilities of providing support to the children of key workers – opportunities for sharing were missed. Maintained teachers were assigned to support pupils in Maintained schools and Controlled teachers were assigned to support pupils in Controlled schools.

It must also be acknowledged that there are aspects of the education system that are not as effective as they might be, and these inefficiencies and inequities inevitably limit the effectiveness of the overall system, particularly in a period of stretched budgets.

Education therefore needs more than tinkering around the edges, it requires transformation if it is to contribute effectively to the building of a peaceful society – and teachers, schools and those that administer and govern them, must be at the very heart of that process.